

Comments on Per Erik Persson's *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*

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I first read Professor Persson's book in the nineties when I was a doctoral student at Boston College. I remember it being such a refreshing read among a sea of commentaries on Thomas that seemed wooden and Neo-Scholastic. My dissertation analyzed Thomas' account of natural knowledge of God. I did not use much secondary research in the project, but I did draw upon Persson's work to signal of the kind of approach to Aquinas that I found very convincing.¹ Re-reading Prof. Persson's book in preparation for this conference has deepened my appreciation for it – having continued to study Thomas in the intervening years. I am reminded of its freshness and of its continued importance in contemporary Thomas scholarship. Certainly scholarship on Thomas has taken cues from Persson's work in the fifties, for much more attention is now being paid to Thomas' scriptural commentaries, to his

daily life as a theologian, as a Dominican, and as a leader of educational reform for his order. My comments this morning will reflect upon Persson's book as a whole, noting how the way he approaches Thomas leads to insightful conclusions about the *Summa*. Prof. Persson is such a brilliant reader of Thomas because he illuminates the organic nature of Thomistic theology. So many of us readers of Thomas overspecialize in one area of his thought and thus become lopsided in our interpretations. This specialization skews our reading of the whole. Prof. Persson's careful reading of the entire *Summa* enables him to appreciate the music while at the same time pointing out some prescient criticisms of Thomas. It is because he reads the *Summa* as an organic enterprise that he is able to write about the relationship of theology to philosophy so eloquently [this is my favorite line in the book]:

A whole new range of action is ... opened up for reason, though no change in its natural structure or method of operation is involved. Theology is thus to be understood primarily not as the master of philosophy but as its liberator and perfecter (236).

¹ Persson's reading of the *Summa theologiae* finds a natural counterpart in Thomas Hibbs' reading of the *Summa contra gentiles* in: *Dialectic Narrative in Aquinas: Interpretation of the Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

Let us take a look into how theology liberates philosophy from the confines of its reach in this reading of Thomas. Prof. Persson suggests that the *Summa* is organized around the different ways that God is present in the world:

God is in everything primarily by the very fact that a thing exists and is therefore utterly dependent on him. But he is also specially present in the righteous as the object of the will and intellect that have been brought to perfection in them by grace. Finally, he is also in Christ, in that the human nature of Christ has been raised to union with one of the persons of the godhead, and exists with his *esse* (223).

Each way of being present corresponds, of course, with a part of the *Summa*. Each part presupposes and deepens the previous one. The structural elements of the presence of God remain the same – basically – throughout, that of a transcendent cause in an effect that is completely dependent upon this cause. But each encounter with that transcendent cause both deepens and elevates the human person, whether through creation, grace or Christ. Quoting Prof. Persson:

Man himself *is* and acts – and therefore is accountable for his deeds – but both his *esse* and *operatio* issue at every moment from God and are immediately dependent upon him. They are gifts given to men by a gracious and benevolent God, though their fashion and form is determined by the nature of the recipient (224).

Even in Christ God is present as transcendent cause in an effect that conforms to that cause. In Christ the “presence” is one of absolute dependence upon God. Persson finds that Thomas’s Christology runs into certain difficulties as it tries to reconcile certain biblical ideas with Thomas’ overarching metaphysical commitments. If these biblical ideas

were really allowed to speak their own distinctive word, they would destroy the structure of thought which in the last resort gives Thomas’s synthesis its unity and cohesion (289-290).

In particular, ideas such as the fact that God is self-giving or a being made man would

ultimately destroy the causal relation between God and man... Where such ideas do appear in scripture, Thomas is forced by his presuppositions to reformulate them, for the causal relation itself assumes that there is an insuperable *diversitas* between divine and human (289-290).

First let me note that I laughed out loud when I read Persson’s account of Thomas’ uneasiness with certain biblical texts. As someone who also approaches Thomas with a hermeneutic of generosity, mine was a laughter of recognition. Persson notes, as many of us do when reading the *Summa theologiae*, that the fusion of biblical and Greek thought in that work makes Thomas sometimes seem more comfortable with the Greek than the biblical. When reading Persson’s commentary here I immediately thought of Thomas’ response in *Prima pars* Question One, article two concerning whether *sacra doctrina* is a *scientia*. The objector states quite understandably that *sacra doctrina* deals with individual facts, such as the deeds of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But an Aristotelian *scientia* trades in universals. Thomas replies that individual facts are treated in *sacra doctrina* only

as examples to be followed in our lives (as in moral sciences) and in order to establish the authority of those men through whom the divine revelation, on which this sacred scripture or doctrine is based, has come down to us.²

One wonders what one should do with the individual person of Christ, who did that individual deed of getting himself hung on a cross. Prof. Persson notes that this commitment to confirming everything within the general *ordo Deum* of the *Summa* leads Thomas into certain nettles that he cannot resolve in the *Tertia pars*.

Current work on Thomas that draws on his biblical commentaries in particular, could offer ways of reading the *Summa* that address this uneasiness in the work. Let me draw your attention to one interpreter who has recently provided original insights into how Thomas uses Old Testament models in his Christology. Matthew Levering has argued convincingly that Thomas’ reading of the Old Testament is crucial for un-

² *Summa theologiae*, I.1.2.ad2.

derstanding how he outlines salvation in the *Summa theologiae*. The Old Law comes to its term and completion with the coming of Christ, who especially in his Passion gives to Torah and Temple their definitive meaning. Levering insists that Thomas intended to portray Christ's work in terms of Israel's threefold office of priest, prophet, and king, with the corresponding fulfillment of the three types of Old Law: precept, the ceremonial, moral, and judicial (53; 66ff.). The Christology of the *Summa* shows how the Messianic expectations of Israel are fulfilled in this one particular and specific way, in the one person of Christ. This is not to deny the uneasiness that Persson uncovers. It is, rather, to uncover another thread of biblical reasoning in the *Summa* that preserves Thomas' commitment to the distinctive role of Christ in the *Summa theologiae*.

I would also like to echo Prof. Persson's criticisms of Roman Catholic thinkers who understand tradition as "a constitutive source of faith standing on an equal line with scripture"³ since no such independent source can be found in Thomas. Persson makes much of the sparse use of the term *traditio* in Thomas to this end. Persson astutely points out that in Thomas:

...tradition is not *complementary* but *interpretive*. Thus the scriptural principle does not mean that scripture is in any way opposed to the interpretation of the church, the tradition of the fathers, and the pronouncements of the *magisterium*. These three elements constitute a unity – and even as early as this we can see the developments in theology which gradually led to the dogma of infallibility – but this unity means that the teaching of the church, *doctrina ecclesiae*, is to be understood essentially as *the interpretation of scripture* (69-70).

Prof. Persson notes also that *traditio* is as natural to Thomas as church, another term that does not occur often in the *Summa* and yet is a reality that

Thomas lives and breathes in his daily life. I would add that with *traditio* in particular there is a performative element in the *Summa* that would reveal its centrality to Thomas' theology. The practice of *disputatio* out of which the *Summa* is composed is performed in conversation with an explicit *traditio*. Thomas uses the *quaestio* format to speak from within this *traditio*, wrestling with some historical members of this tradition, in conversation with others. While this *traditio* does not of course constitute some independent source of authority, and it gives voice to arguments that only have *probaliter* authority, it is organically related to both the source of *sacra scriptura* and the practice of *sacra doctrina*. And the resolutions that Thomas offers to the web of questions in the *summa* arose out of an intense grappling with this *traditio* of interpreters, whether they emerge in the objections, the *sed contra*, or in Thomas' own replies.

Let me close by making one final note. Sometimes, in reading an author we get the sense of that author as a teacher. This definitely happened to me when reading this book. The precision, the patience, the clarity, the careful use of language, all pointed to someone who clearly was dedicated to the pedagogical task. That must be one of the reasons why Prof. Persson was drawn to Thomas Aquinas. He explains the relative infrequent use of the term *theologia* in Thomas in comparison with his contemporaries by the fact that *theologia* cannot convey "the sense of teaching and the outward activity which clearly for Thomas constitute the theological task" (71). Reading both Thomas and Persson leads this reader to note that for neither is theology undertaken for its own sake, but as instruction of students for the knowledge of salvation. I join you today in honoring Prof. Persson by wishing that I, too, had had him as my teacher in person, not just on the written page.

³ Persson, 67, cite original citation within Persson text. Originally in A. Lang, *Die Loci theologici des Melchior Cano und die Methode des dogmatischen Beweises. Ein Beitrag zur theologischen Methodologie und ihrer Geschichte* (Münchener Studien zur historischen Theologie 6) Munich 1925, p. 112.