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Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*. London and New York: T & T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, 2016.

Steven J. Duby has written an excellent work of theological scholarship in support of what is, to my mind, a dubious cause. He writes as a *restorationist* of Reformed scholastic orthodoxy (pp. 3, 122), and in “dogmatics” he deploys a pre-critical method of garnering and systematizing propositions found in Scripture (Lindbeck’s “propositionalism”). This restorationism hinges upon two special commitments which recur regularly throughout the work: first, the interpretation of Trinitarian persons as modalities of the single deity-person (pp. 24, 121, 155, 158, 218, 227-8), a move which, following Augustine, confounds the crucial distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* worked out by the Cappadocians between Nicea and Constantinople; and second, also following Augustine, the corresponding assignment of God taken “absolutely” to the category of “nature” or “essence,” treating, then, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the same divine substance taken “relatively” (e.g., p. 222).

Referencing the Athanasian Creed, Duby writes in conclusion: “With the *distinctio modalis* in hand, one can identify each of the persons as the one God and then, given that each person is not identical with God absolutely or exhaustively but just as a certain *modus subsistendi* and is thus distinct from God taken absolutely as *modus rei a re*, one can affirm that each of the persons is each modally and relatively distinct from the other persons as *modi subsistendi*” (p. 224). This conclusion yields what may be described as a psychological model of the Trinity as opposed to the social model given to us in Jesus’ high priestly prayer (John 17:20-26). God is thought

1. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). With respect to theological method I make the same critique of neo-scholastic Lutheran restorationists. See my “Prima Scriptura: Saving Sola Scriptura from Itself,” *Dialog* 55/3 (Fall 2016): 223-30.

to be one as mind subsisting in the modalities of thinking, thinking itself and willing itself in splendid, timeless and thus simple self-identity, hence as “divine simplicity.”

By contrast, I have written about the Western doctrine of divine simplicity from the perspective of the criticisms of it, notably first by Karl Barth (on its tendency to quaternity, p. 32), Jürgen Moltmann (on its tendency to Sabellianism, pp. 40, 208-9), followed by Colin Gunton, Eberhard Jüngel and especially Robert Jenson (who pioneered “patrology” as a retrieval of the Eastern *pater est fons divinitatis*, p. 170). These sources of mine (which Duby discusses only to reject) betray a specific level of disagreement between the author and myself on the basis of confession—the Reformed theologians of those I just listed are all profoundly and positively influenced by the Lutheran affirmation of the Christological *communicatio idiomatum* and, because of its *universal* scope, a corresponding rejection of the necessitarian implication from classical divine simplicity: *double* predestination, with its correlative doctrine of *limited* atonement. The knowledge of God as the one creator, but also redeemer and fulfiller of all that is not God, accordingly, is not thought by these critics to arise from the protological speculation of fallen reason about a first cause or prime mover but from the Exodus and Easter events of salvation; hence the doctrine of creation is from the outset eschatologically oriented. Biblically, it is no accident that the high monotheism of the Second Isaiah has Yahweh announce the good news categorically, “Behold, I am doing a new thing!” (Isa. 43:19).

Such criticism of classical simplicity, however, does not lead me to reckless endorsements of divine passibility, or to fall into the clutches of the bogeyman, i.e., Hegel² (who plays this role in Duby’s genealogy, p. 27), or to reject the necessity of an ecumenical doctrine of divine simplicity.³ Rather, I have written as a revisionist who wants to unveil the definite liabilities of the classical version of simplicity, whether in its Augustinian-Platonic form or its Thomistic-Aristotelian form, and to advocate for a “weaker” rule version of the doctrine (parallel but not identical with Eleanor Stump’s essentially Leibnizian proposal in the philosophy of religion, pp. 62-64).

The editor of the *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* therefore invited Duby and me to exchange reviews of each other’s books, full well knowing that we each regard the other’s project as wrong-headed. *Vive la difference!* In such circumstances, however, if we are to shed light rather than heat, it is important to strive toward “achieving disagreement.”⁴ This is an ecumenical method in Christian dogmatics which strives to identify the common basis in Christian dogma, to recognize the legitimate concern underlying the formulations one finds problematical

2. See the sharp critique of Hegel’s toxic “negative dialectics” in Brent Adkins and Paul R. Hinlicky, *Rethinking Philosophy and Theology with Deleuze: A New Cartography* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

3. As Jordan P. Barrett rightly sees my revisionist stance in his *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Theological Account* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 16-17.

4. On ecumenical method in doctrinal theology, see Paul R. Hinlicky, “Process, Convergence, Declaration: Reflections on Doctrinal Dialogue,” *The Cresset* (Pentecost, 2001) Vol. LXIV, No. 6, 13-18.

in an opponent's appropriation and elaboration of common Christian dogma, and to seek together new formulations which reconcile the opposing formulations. I'm not optimistic that this final goal can be achieved with our exchange, but I will review Duby's work with the two first provisos in mind.

Ecumenical Dogma: God is One as the Creator of all that is not God

As already indicated in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, there has never been an ecumenical decision on the *sense* of the oneness of God, even though the Shema of Israel has been, and must be, taken as Scripture. Appeals to divine simplicity in elaboration of the sense of biblical monotheism range classically from Irenaeus in his battle against the Gnostics to Origen's inference to the eternal generation of the Son to the hyper-Arian Eunomius' campaign against the Cappadocian interpretation of the Nicene *homoousios* as they clarified it against Marcellus of Ancyra's modalism.⁵ Manifestly, then, as a matter of historical fact the sense of divine simplicity remains an open question in critical dogmatics. Duby is a somewhat reluctant witness to this fact of the history of dogma (p. 17). To his credit, however, he acknowledges the questionableness of his use of the "Aristotelian tradition in particular as mediated and modified by Thomas and a number of the Reformed scholastic theologians..." and confesses that it "is a contingent and, in some measure, ad hoc decision..." (p. 64).

On the level of ecumenical Christian dogma, this concession to historical fact is crucial. One should not anathematize alternative understandings of divine simplicity, even if one is theologically critical of them. On the level of dogma, what must be maintained is that "God" in Christian understanding is understood as the free creator of all that is not God—the creator-creature distinction taken according to *creatio ex nihilo* to which Duby frequently and rightly avers. On this level of ecumenical dogma there is no quarrel between us, even though I will question theologically how free Duby's "deity itself subsisting" (p. 226) is and with what kind of freedom it is endowed, when the biblical witness to God who makes all things new is forced into the Procrustean bed of classical, i.e., protological metaphysics.

The *reductionism* of "protological" metaphysics is to reduce all questions to one of origin. This reductionism is a facet of the apophatic *radicalism* of "divine simplicity" in classical philosophy—what Hegel tagged as the power of the negative. It is based on an illicit inference from worldly experience of causality to initial conditions—what Kant famously exposed as transcendental illusion. One cannot hope to retrieve today without passing through these critical questions. Post-critical theology is precisely not the reassertion of the pre-critical!

5. As alluded above, Duby evidently *endorses* Ayres' misleading representation of Marcellus (p. 8). See Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 203-33.

Confessional Divergence

We do have a confessional quarrel, as mentioned above, which I would simply outline here without any attempt to adjudicate it.⁶ It concerns the Christological *communicatio idiomatum*, which Duby rejects (p. 192) and the Lutheran rejection (Formula of Concord XI) of double predestination, which Duby ever so gingerly affirms (p. 112, 196). What is at stake in “evangelical historicism” (attributed to the Lutheran Jenson, p. 1, 34fn) is a robust affirmation of divine freedom for creation, incarnation and the coming of the beloved community as real relations of Creator to creature. This freedom to love is not “the liberty of indifference” which Duby affirms (p. 201; he is otherwise hostile to Occam’s “radicalism,” p. 17) but rather divine, glorious freedom to love wisely even the unlovely through the foolishness of Messiah’s cross, wiser than the wisdom of men. But in his attempt to harmonize a liberty of indifference with the necessity of God as perfect being, *actus purus*, inclusive of God’s eternal and unchangeable will (p. 196), Duby at length (tacitly) concedes defeat by appealing to “mystery” (p. 207, 215). This conclusion is in reality a costly theological choice,⁷ since, as Leibniz showed in his dispute with Pufendorf, the liberty of indifference is the liberty of a tyrant who offers no good reasons for acts other than the tyrant’s arbitrary whim.⁸ But Jesus Christ is the good reason for all of God’s ways.

To be sure, the *philosophical* alternative to the tyrant’s liberty is the Platonic assertion (cf. the dialogue *Euthyphro*) of eternal ideas or moral principles independent of God and by which God might be judged; Duby is right to argue with Thomas’s support against “unbaptized” (Jenson) Platonism that God is not “constituted by principles” (p. 79, 107, 124). This is also a perfectly Barthian point against modern Feuerbachian theologies: subject and predicate in statements like “God is love” are not convertible.

But the *theological* alternative alike to Platonic and to Aristotelian philosophical theologies is a “dispositional ontology” such as represented by the innovative Calvinist Jonathan Edwards. Divine disposition is articulated by the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, so that God as the Beloved Community of the Father and the Son

6. For a Lutheran-Reformed *Auseinandersetzung*, see Paul R. Hinlicky, “Scripture as Matrix, Christ as Content: A Reponse to Johannes Zachuber and Anna Case-Winters,” chp. 14 in *Refracted Luther: The Reformer’s Ecumenical Legacy*, ed. Piotr J. Malysz and Derek R. Nelson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 299-317.

7. This is precisely the same criticism I made of James E. Dolezal at the conclusion of my *Divine Simplicity*. See Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity: Christ the Crisis of Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 197-202.

8. Reflection on possible worlds, which Duby rejects (p. 194, 203) in rejecting the *potentia absoluta/ordinata* distinction (p. 201), can illuminate the divine and free choice for this very world on which the cross of Jesus stood. One would then take this choice to create in order to redeem the creation in Christ as the mystery hidden from the ages but now revealed, aka, “the divine decree”—and not some predetermined muster of humanity into the ranks of those to be saved and those to be damned

in the Spirit is, as Leibniz would say, “inclined but not necessitated” to the great acts of creation, redemption and fulfillment attested in the Holy Scriptures; so true God is recognized by creatures as the promised harmony of power, wisdom and love on the way to the Pauline “redemption of our bodies.” To his credit, Duby acknowledges that the “loss of freedom” (p. 26) represents the “poignant” objection to the classical doctrines of divine simplicity; thus he bravely and consequently denies any novelty to God (p. 123, 128). And this denial leads to the heart of the confessional objection.

Here a doctrine of Scripture as a compendium of revealed propositions bearing timeless truth has displaced the good news of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus as the very Word of God. The Word of God is *news*, no less for God than for us—if the resurrection is indeed the Father’s vindication of the derelict Son hanging on the tree, having drunk the cup of wrath for his act of loving solidarity with sinners, the Lamb bearing away the *sin of the world*. If we take this gospel of *unlimited* atonement as *the* Word of God which also norms the reading of Holy Scripture, we discern the *movement* of God who *comes* in the mercy of his love surpassing the wrath of his love. This divine *advent* is the Word of God incarnate and so also preached by the Spirit.

One would accordingly not affirm, as Duby does, that relations to creatures are not real to God (p. 144), but only refer to different relations that creatures adopt toward God who, per classical divine simplicity, is and ever remains immutably the unmoved mover (p. 140). Moreover, in articulating an evangelical doctrine of God, one would infer the divine condition for the possibility of the advent of the God of the gospel by the anti-modalist middle axiom that the saving God does not deceive but is truthful to Himself as to us in this outreach to the creature. That is to say that as, per 1 Corinthians 8, God is God *for us* as the Father who sends the Son in the power of the Spirit, so God is God *to God in God* (“absolutely” if we must speak this way) as the eternal Father of the Son on whom He breathes His Spirit. Thus we have a doctrine of the *immanent* Trinity as the basis of divine freedom to love in history—a position that has been smartly argued by Paul Molnar⁹ (conceding, then, some weaknesses to the positions taken by Jenson and especially McCormack—Duby’s “illogic of self-causation,” p. 130).

Theological Elaborations

If we can agree ecumenically on the dogma that the almighty Father by His Word and Spirit is the one creator of all that is not God, and agree that we disagree confessionally about how we are brought to that articulation of the common faith, we might still weigh theologically the relative merits theologically of our respective positions in fair-minded, even charitable ways.

9. Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and The Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, second edition (London & New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017).

The basic question is whether regulating the knowledge of God by the Trinitarian self-revelation of the gospel evacuates God of transcendence or whether an incarnational theology limits and thus specifies the peculiar transcendence of the Christian God as freedom to love wisely. Subsidiary to this basic question is whether creation is to be conceived of protologically or eschatologically. If protologically there pre-exists a cognitively accessible generic theism, a “natural theology” as if providing a foundation upon which the superstructure of supernatural revelation may be erected. If eschatologically, then “creation” cannot be accessed by sinful creatures (for “we want to be God and do not want God to be God”—Luther) apart from their redemption and promised fulfillment. In parallel, the question arises whether predestination is to be understood anthropologically and individualistically or Christologically and socially. All this we might fruitfully explore together, if only to “achieve disagreement.”

But there is an obstacle: the thicket of problems regarding the meaningfulness of language about God. The analogical approach advocated by Duby of “many representations but one and the same reference” (p. 188) seems to entail that theological language succeeds when pointing—quite literally—out of this world to an incomprehensible sheer act of perfect being, we know not what. I deny that such language is meaningful; indeed, I regard it as vacuous, the reification of a No-Thing. Thus with Plantinga, Moreland and Craig, I regard resort to analogy, which in any event finally collapses into mystery mongering, as a conversation-stopper (p. 72)—and not a benign one since assertion of it leads to modalism in the doctrine of God and Nestorianism in Christology.

To be meaningful or to have sense in this time-space continuum, human language about God must be able to state what *in the world* it is talking about, a usage that depends on semantical (not ontological) univocity. God is the One who raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus *is* the Son of God. The blessed loaf *is* the body of the risen Jesus Christ. These identity statements are catachrestic metaphors, which are deliteralized and decoded to speak of novelties in the world for which no pre-existing vocabulary is suitable (cf. Mark 10:45), referring in this way to God who *comes to us* “deep in the flesh” (Luther), as Jüngel would put it.¹⁰

Conclusion: Genealogy vs. *philosophia perennis*

One of the great strengths of Duby’s study is that he has clearly articulated the historical significance of Thomas Aquinas’ doctrine of divine simplicity as blocking Platonic emanationism, something Augustine asserted dogmatically but could not

10. Paul R. Hinlicky, “Metaphorical Truth and the Language of Christian Theology,” Chapter Six in *Indicative of Grace, Imperative of Freedom: Essays in Honor of Eberhard Jüngel in His 80th Year*, ed. R. David Nelson (London and New York: Bloomsbury/ T & T Clark, 2014), 89-100.

Paul R. Hinlicky: *Book Review Article of Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* yet conceptualize.¹¹ With categories developed by and borrowed from Avicenna, Thomas was able to conceive of the identity of existence and essence in the divine and perfect being, as constituting a singularity, which as such can only be finitely reflected in various ways in creatures; creatures thus do not essentially participate in God, which would both violate the simplicity of *actus purus* and tacitly divinize creatures in the process. The fierce repudiation of ontological univocity for positing a *commune esse* to which both Creator and creature belong as instantiations is a theme that runs through the book (e.g., p. 175). The resulting Thomistic doctrine has in turn both obviously apophatic but also cataphatic elements (p. 8), since a similarity in being is asserted in positively affirming that God's act is to exist perfectly as creatures know themselves to exist imperfectly. I will go so far here as to grant that *if* we lived in a world in which Aristotelian naturalism or neo-Platonic emanationism were the metaphysical options of our times, Thomas' achievement would remain commendable. But this is long since not the case.

I have no quarrel with interpreters who hold to the ultimately apophatic implications of Thomistic doctrine. In fact, I think that the "ever greater dissimilarity" of Lateran IV finally overwhelms the "creaturely similarity." The result, as mentioned above, is that Thomas' doctrine, too, at length has to succumb to the "dialectic of the negative," which dialectic can be traced back to the pre-Socratics. Mere abstract being is, in any case, a thin reed on which to hang the cataphatic meaningfulness of Christian talk about God in the world. For the cataphatic element—that God may truly be likened to creaturely beings as the eminent "being itself"—succumbs to the critical exposé of transcendental illusion (cf. pp. 12-13).

At least since Kant transcendental inferences like this to alleged metaphysical insights are rightly suspect of accomplishing no more than illicit projections of creaturely categories onto the unknowable noumenal. Privileging "existence" does not demonstrate the reality of a perfectly existing being as God, but only, as Jenson held, an idolatrous "metaphysics of persistence." For the categories of essence and existence are worldly categories. What exists in the world persists in time. It is an illusion to think of temporal persistence as the decisive analogue of the reality of the God of the gospel, which biblically is rather the coming of the kingdom. That is why Paul Tillich, who in many respects followed out the trajectory of classical simplicity, finally had to retract his claim that God is literally being itself, and concede that this, too, is a symbolic statement.¹² Tillich's theology in this way witnesses to the revenge that will be taken on Christian theologies when they hitch their wagons to a strong doctrine of simplicity—that is, if they cease dodging its "radical" implications

11. Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 249-53.

12. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 volumes (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967), II: 5-12.

with pious invocations of mystery that slam on the brakes just before this machine drives off the cliff.

So even granting for the sake of the argument that Duby successfully defends Thomas' version of *actus purus* as blocking the road to Platonic emanationism, it seems to me that this leaves him on the horns of a dilemma. One can block platonic emanationism in this way only to succumb to the ultimate vacuity of one's language regarding God, despite being dressed out with Scriptural names. Or one can follow Maartin Wisse's lead, as I discussed in my *Divine Simplicity*, in interpreting the gravamen of Augustine's pre-Thomistic attempt to blockade emanationism by resolutely drawing the conclusion that the strong doctrine of divine simplicity "defunctionalizes the Trinity." In this way, however, one reconfirms the gravamen of the Regnon thesis.

Perhaps an underlying reason for the divergence on divine simplicity between us is that I argue in theology with a genealogical method. I hold that the community of faith in its history with the God of the gospel constructs doctrine theologically in order to indigenize its message in a given time or place. This is needful; however, it can lead to cultural captivity. So as a result revision or modernization, which includes the element of retrieval from the dogmatic heritage, is an ongoing but *critical* dogmatic task. Just as the God of the gospel kills in order to make alive, theologians of the gospel deconstruct in order to reconstruct.

My genealogical argument is that the dialectic of the negative, which inspired the pre-Socratics to the initial formulations of divine simplicity, continues on untamed and untamable even in its Christian theological appropriations. This is why I characterize Thomas' synthesis as "unstable." And it is a fact of history that the great lights of the medieval period following Thomas, Duns Scotus and William Occam, could not sustain his synthesis. Progressively detached from the Creator-creature distinction which Thomas borrowed from revealed theology to tame it, the dogma of strong simplicity came to its radical denouement in Spinoza's philosophy, which Hegel later took up and dramatized as a historical process. This genealogy of the radicalness of strong simplicity terminating in post-Christian atheism ought to send critically dogmatic Christian theologians today back to the perichoresis of John 17 for the ontology of divine being.