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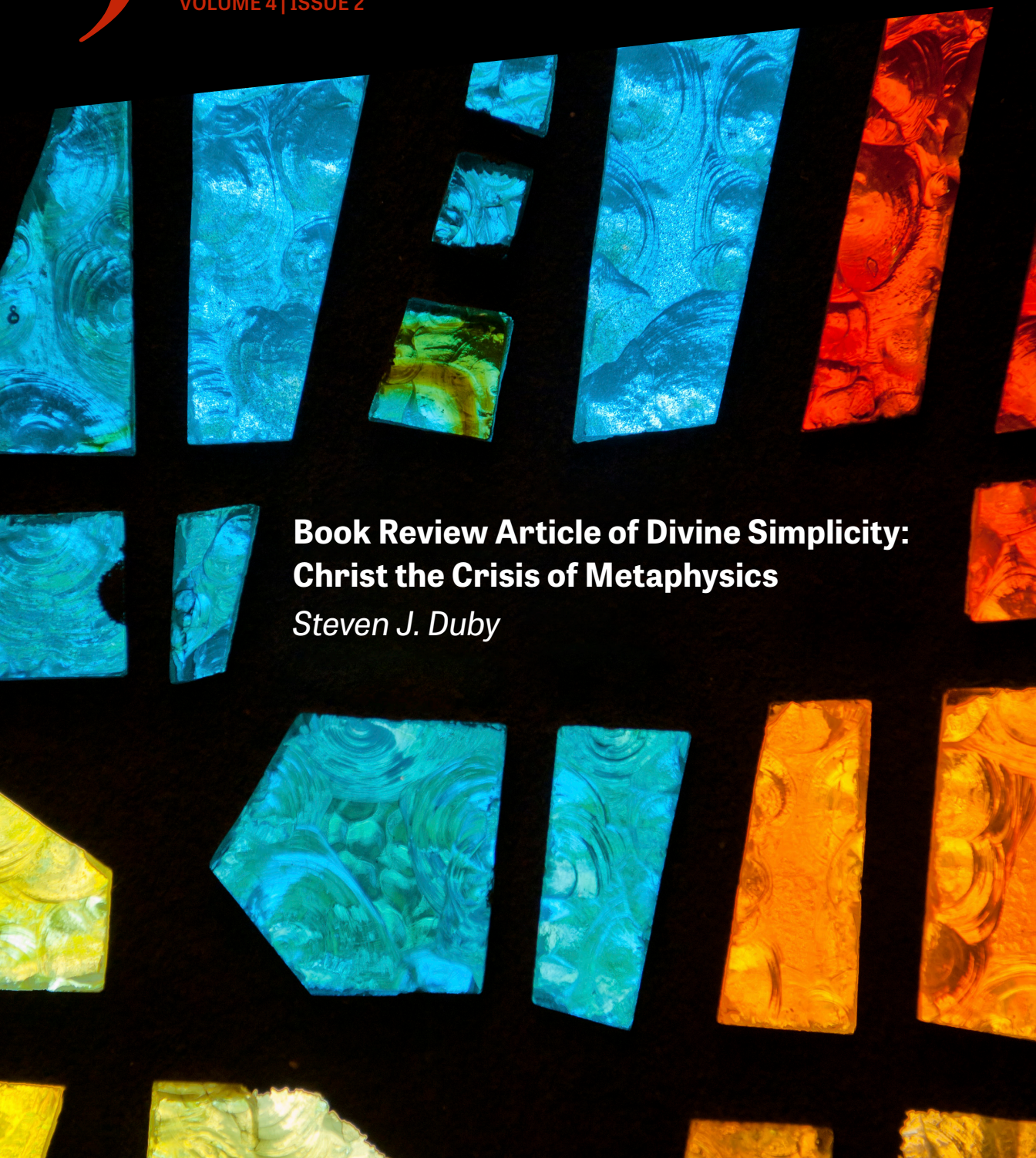

Book Review Article of Divine Simplicity: Christ the Crisis of Metaphysics

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Debates about the doctrine of divine simplicity have escalated in recent years and given rise to defenses, rejections and modifications of the doctrine. It is a teaching that is often unfamiliar to Christians living in the twenty-first century, but it has played a significant role in Christian accounts of the triune God from the very beginning of church history. At a general level, it can be described as the teaching that God is not composed of parts but is really identical with (the same "thing" as) his own essence, existence and attributes. The divine attributes (e.g., wisdom, love) are not qualities added to God's essence but rather are descriptions of that essence viewed from different angles. The persons of the Trinity are not parts composing a greater divine whole. Rather, the whole divine essence exists in the Father, Son and Spirit, who are distinguished by their proper modes of existing in relation to one another. In patristic, medieval and early Protestant theology, simplicity is not used to eliminate all distinctions in God; rather, given that the Father, Son and Spirit are truly distinct from one another, it is used to clarify what sorts of distinctions could be drawn in theology proper without compromising God's indivisibility and aseity. For the catholic Christian tradition, to deny that God is simple is to imply that there is a reality beyond him that puts him together, so to speak, a reality upon which he must draw in order to be the God that he is. Despite its place in the development of Christian theology, a number of authors have raised questions about the doctrine, one of whom is Paul Hinlicky.

Presented as a critique of "the received doctrine of divine simplicity" (p. xiv) and a commendation of an alternative view of the doctrine, Hinlicky's work aims to argue that God's historical activity (especially in the incarnation) is the right starting point for Christian speech about God's unity. In the introduction, he announces that he will set aside "natural theology" as a basis for talk about God's "protological simplicity" and will instead propose a "weak" or "eschatological" version of simplicity, one in which God's unity "is not a rationally evident implication that comes about by analysis of the ground of a stable and manifest cosmos. Rather, it is something posited and achieved in a fraught and contested world and thus finally

demonstrated in the historical life of a particular claimant to deity by the coming, in Jesus' language, of the reign of God and, in Paul's language, the redemption of our bodies" (pp. xviii-xix). Hinlicky characterizes his account of simplicity as a "rule": "so speak of the one true God as the Father of the Son, who in the Spirit infinitely gives such that we and all creatures are spoken of as gifted" (p. xxi). "Abstractly put in terms of a characterization of the singularity of the divine nature, the freedom to love wisely is divine—the whatness of the one true God in the act of His being, also for us, when the eternal act of God's being is understood as the Father's generation of the Son, on whom He breathes His Spirit" (pp. xxi-xxii).

In chapter one, Hinlicky begins to sketch his "rule" view of divine simplicity and locates God's unity in "trinitarian perichoresis, the mutual indwelling of the trinitarian persons" (p. 1). Hinlicky expresses concerns about various features of "protological simplicity." For example, he considers it to be a modalist "subversion of robust trinitarianism" since (he thinks) it affirms a divine nature behind the persons ("the invention of a divine fourth," p. 18) that secures their unity, and since it refuses to affirm that the Father, Son and Spirit take a "risk" in engaging creatures and "[come] to their divine unity by way of a dramatic history with one another on account of their even more dramatic engagement with creatures" (p. 24). Hinlicky is also concerned that the "protological" version of divine simplicity compromises God's freedom in acting toward creatures since it leaves us asking how a God who exists in "timeless self-identity" could perform new actions in time. It seems to Hinlicky that the only option for the Christian advocate of divine simplicity would be to build into the very being of God a necessary movement toward the creature.

In chapter two, Hinlicky works through Fergus Kerr and David Burrell on Aquinas' doctrine of God. Though he acknowledges that Aquinas endeavors to speak positively of God and to take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously, Hinlicky concludes that Aquinas causes problems for a Christian account of God because his view yields an "unstable" approach to theological description. Aquinas' "cosmological" approach to God (reasoning from the reality of the cosmos to a transcendent cause) is ultimately too negative: "sheer pointing to a Beyond as the really Real of our reality that is on examination no more than a Not-Nothing" (p. 49). As an alternative to Aquinas' view of God's simplicity, Hinlicky proposes what he calls—following Robert Jenson—a "patrological" account of God's unity in which there is an "eternal circulation of the persons…beginning with the Father's begetting of the Son, on whom he breathes His Spirit, so that in the Spirit the Son returns to the Father the praise of His deity, and so circulating ad infinitum" (p. 52). According to Hinlicky, on this view the Father is the source of the divine unity, not a nature lurking behind the persons that would, in its "timeless self-identity" (p. 56), preclude the freedom of God in his action toward us. The chapter closes with a lengthy excursus on "true gnosis in Clement of Alexandria" (p. 72).

In chapter three, Hinlicky engages Augustine's reflection on the Trinity in light of 1 Corinthians 1:24, where Christ is called the power and wisdom of God. For Hinlicky, Augustine fails to grasp the real meaning of the distinction between essence and person in God and unfortunately takes a divine nature or "substance" existing beneath the persons to be "what is really real in God," a substance whose attributes cannot be divided up among the persons. Augustine is thus guilty of promoting what becomes the "de facto quaternity of Western modalism" (p. 105). By contrast, Hinlicky seems to suggest that it would be better if we took "'nature' semantically as a conceptual class specifying the perfections that befit the divine and, further, construed befitting attributes of divinity according to what properties or capacities must be at the disposal of the God who as personal subject freely creates everything other than God" (p. 103). If that is what a nature is, then in God's case "individual divine persons utilize and so manifest particular properties from that class of divine perfections according to their personal distinctions and corresponding economic roles" (p. 103), even if those roles are inseparable. Because Augustine did not find such a way to escape "the contradiction that he forced between trinitarian personalism and protological simplicity," Hinlicky concludes that Augustine merely "anointed" the contradiction to be a "mystery." But, in Hinlicky's words, this is really a "muddle" rather than a mystery (p. 105). This chapter also provides some discussion about the relevance of Christology to Hinlicky's case for an "eschatological" simplicity, in conversation with John Meyendorff and Knut Alfsvåg.

The last chapter of the book engages the topics of the analogy of being and the nature of theological language (univocity versus analogy). Hinlicky expresses appreciation for Barth's thinking on the analogy of being and suggests that the correspondence between creatures and God is "eschatologically oriented," brought about by God's redeeming work in history (p. 152). Hinlicky interacts with Richard Cross, Eberhard Jüngel and others on the question of univocity in theological language, and he contends that Aquinas' analogical view is inadequate to uphold positive speech about God. Later in this chapter Hinlicky engages Karl Barth and Bruce McCormack on a variety of issues in theology proper and Christology, concurring with some of their lines of thought but also calling some of them into question with resources from his own Lutheran tradition.

Hinlicky uses the conclusion of the book to comment on James Dolezal's recent articulation of divine simplicity, deprecating "the muddle he has made of the Trinity" and yet assuring the reader that Dolezal's work is still the "best contemporary alternative to the present case" (p. 198). For Hinlicky, there is a decision to be made between the "protological" view of God's simplicity and the "strong trinitarian personalism" he is advocating in his approach to the divine unity (pp. 201-2). Right after this, however, Hinlicky remarks that, in any event, the approach he has advocated is "hermeneutical rather than propositional, pragmatic rather than theoretical." To have "directly engaged" divine simplicity like Dolezal in a "propositional and

theoretical manner" in order to yield "metaphysical insight" would have required facing the same dilemmas on the horns of which "Dolezal willingly impales himself" (p. 202). Hinlicky appropriates George Lindbeck's account of the nature of doctrine, commenting that, while it does not necessarily set aside a realist view of doctrinal claims altogether, it does mean that a "second-order" affirmation like that of divine simplicity is one that "sorts out the right usage of possible first-order cognitive claims in theology" (pp. 202-3). Finally, Hinlicky closes with an attempt to complete his line of argument by an appeal to how the first table of the Decalogue speaks about God.

In offering some critical analysis of Hinlicky's work, I will present my thoughts under five points. First, the book's argument for a "rule" version of divine simplicity lacks clarity and, as the author acknowledges, allows him to avoid facing difficult questions surrounding the issue of divine simplicity. On the one hand, Hinlicky insists that he is simply providing some clarifications regarding our speech about God's unity. Indeed, he asserts that "[t]heology can never, not in all eternity, say or comprehend how its affirmations are true" since that is the business of God alone (p. 137). On the other hand, he makes many ontological claims about God's unity and even says "a rule version implies an ontology and is and must be grounded in a cognitive claim" (p. 122). In light of this, both defenders and critics of traditional formulations of divine simplicity will likely come away wondering what Hinlicky aims to accomplish. Does he intend to clarify what the phrase "divine simplicity" means and how it functions within the doctrine of God? If so, as he acknowledges, this cannot be accomplished without making ontological claims. Given that the book does make claims about the reality of God, it would have benefited from an engagement of some of the problems that come with denying that God is simple in the sense intended by Augustine, Thomas and others. For example, is Hinlicky prepared to say that there are parts that compose God? Would that comport with God's ultimacy and aseity? I had hoped that Hinlicky would address issues like this instead of stating that he chose to set them aside and let authors like Dolezal "impale" themselves on the horns of the pertinent dilemmas.

Second, another feature of the book that will likely be problematic for both defenders and critics of divine simplicity is its organization. The problems here are perhaps best illustrated by the fact that Hinlicky uses the very end of the conclusion to work through his argument from the teaching of the Decalogue to his view of divine simplicity. This should be undertaken in one of the main chapters. In this part of the conclusion the author also chooses to argue for Brevard Childs' view that the final form of the biblical text is the proper focus of exegesis. This is an important hermeneutical principle, but why does it merit attention in the conclusion of the book? Moreover, why call Dolezal's work the strongest alternative and then wait until the conclusion to interact directly with him and quickly dismiss his view as a "muddle"? Other examples could be multiplied. The latter part of chapter two requires the reader to move quickly from the philosophy of Muslim author Seyyed Hossein Nasr to Duns

Scotus on univocity to an excursus on Clement of Alexandria. (Scotus on univocity then appears again in chapter four.) In chapter three on pages 106-7 the author's preview of the upcoming content gives a sense of his manner of covering different topics. There Hinlicky writes, after criticizing Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity, that he will engage Gavin Ortlund's recent article on the diverse formulations of divine simplicity in the Christian tradition, return to Augustine by analyzing Lewis Ayres' and then Maarten Wisse's accounts of Augustine on divine simplicity and the Trinity and then follow with an engagement of Knut Alfsvåg on "Christological apophaticism." Both those who sympathize with the likes of Augustine and Thomas and those who disagree with them would have benefited from a more natural organization and logical development in the book.

Third, and more seriously, Hinlicky's descriptions of various authors' views are too often misleading. It is difficult to avoid the thought that these historical problems are in large part due to the dearth of actual engagement with primary sources. For example, on page 7 the author mentions Athanasius (without citing any of his works) as a champion of the perichoresis of the divine persons but neglects to mention that Athanasius anchored perichoresis in the Father, Son and Spirit sharing the simple divine essence.[1] In multiple places, Hinlicky invokes "social trinitarianism," often with a nod toward the teaching of the Cappadocians (e.g., pp., xv, 43, 58-9). However, he does not explain precisely what he means by "social trinitarianism," a view that is often associated at present with the idea that there are three sets of faculties (intellect, will) in the divine persons. Hinlicky also asserts that the Cappadocians hold that the persons are "prior" to the essence without citing any works or explaining what this priority involves (pp. 121-2). Would this be an epistemological or ontological priority? Hinlicky appears unaware of strong statements about the Father begetting the essence in the Son in Western fathers like Hilary and Augustine.[2] For an author like Hilary it is not just the essence but the Father's communication of the essence to the Son that secures the unity and equality of the persons. Hinlicky also does not take into account the fact that medieval theologians in the West like Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas offer plausible readings of patristic statements on the Father begetting the essence in the Son that fit with their understanding of divine simplicity.[3] Hinlicky emphasizes that the Cappadocians accomplished a revolution in securing a clear distinction between nature and person. Without taking anything away from the Cappadocians, one may well wonder if Hinlicky's vilification of the West might have been tempered by a study of the contributions that Hilary, Boethius, Richard of St. Victor or Bonaventure have made on this issue.

Hinlicky blames Augustine for many problems in "Western" trinitarianism. Among other things, he criticizes Augustine's "uncomprehending reduction of

1. E.g., *Athanasius, Orations against the Arians*, III.5.
2. See Hilary, *On the Trinity*, V.11.35 and Augustine, *On the Trinity*, VII.2.3.
3. See Lombard, *Sentences*, I.5.1 and Aquinas, *Against the Errors of the Greeks*, I.4-5.

persons to the bare relations…by which they are distinguished" (p. 106), but, in fact, Augustine's identification of the persons both as relations and, with respect to what they are absolutely, as the essence itself ensures precisely that the persons cannot be mere relations. Hinlicky repeatedly appeals to differences between Eastern and Western doctrines of the Trinity, as discussed by Theodore de Régnon (pp. 120-1, 134). However, he does not actually delve into the works of the Eastern fathers to explain how they are so different from the Western fathers, and he does not engage the relevant work of authors like Michel René Barnes on the subject. In this book, Hinlicky only offers a reading (arguably a caricature) of Augustine and sets it against some unsubstantiated claims about the Cappadocians.

In his comments on Aquinas, Hinlicky suggests that the Angelic Doctor seeks a rational foundation for supernatural theology (p. 130), but Aquinas explicitly criticizes such an approach.[4] Contrary to Hinlicky's claims about Aquinas' lopsided apophaticism, a number of Aquinas scholars have explained how his approach to the knowledge of God coherently brings together both negative and positive elements.[5] Aquinas is unflinching in his statement that all the positive perfections found in creatures are found eminently in God.[6] Despite Hinlicky's comments that Aquinas and other earlier Christian authors hold that God is "timeless" or "outside" time, figures like Anselm and Aquinas in fact stress that God is present and active with creatures in time.[7] Hinlicky claims that Aquinas views the divine nature as a quasi-agent that diminishes the personal agency of the persons (p. 133), but Aquinas offers a very clear distinction between nature and person and subscribes to the axiom that actions are performed by persons (actus sunt suppositorum).[8] Furthermore, the claim that Aquinas neglects the freedom of God and that Scotus outshines him on this topic (pp. 68, 135) should not be made without attending to Aquinas' denial of God acting by a "necessity of nature" and his nuanced understanding of the communicative nature of God's goodness.[9] I am sympathetic to Hinlicky's concern to uphold God's freedom, and an article I'd written on integrating God's simplicity and God's freedom does make an appearance in the introduction of this volume (p. xiv, note 2). However,

4. See his *Exposition of Boethius* On the Trinity, 2.1 and *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.1.1.

5. See, e.g., Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 27-74; Thomas Joseph White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology*, 2nd ed. (Ave Maria: Sapientia Press, 2016), 255-74.

6. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.4.2.

7. For a brief summary, see Steven J. Duby, "Divine Action and the Meaning of Eternity," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11 (2017), 358-65.

8. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.29.2; 39.5 ad 1.

9. Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*, III.15; *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.19.3 ad 3. See further John F. Wippel, "Norman Kretzmann on Aquinas' Attribution of Will and of Freedom to Create to God," *Religious Studies* 39 (2003): 295-97. See also the comparison of Aquinas and Scotus in Richard A. Muller, *Divine Will and Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency and Necessity in Early Modern Reformed Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), chs. 3-4.

Hinlicky does not actually interact with the article's central thesis. Indeed, he ends up showing that he misunderstands it entirely by confusing the distinction between absolute divine attributes (e.g., goodness, power) and relative divine attributes (e.g., Creator, Lord) with another use of the distinction between the absolute (what is shared by the divine persons) and the relative (what is proper to the individual persons). In confusing what is relative in the first use of the distinction with what is relative in the second use of the distinction, he wrongly implies that I relegate the Trinity to the economy where attributes like Creator and Lord come into play, and he never actually deals with the proposal about divine simplicity and divine freedom.

Fourth, Hinlicky's constructive claims are problematic. In particular, he emphasizes the importance of divine freedom and faults Augustinian and Thomistic accounts of simplicity and the Trinity for undermining God's freedom in his engagement of creatures. However, Hinlicky never addresses how this emphasis on divine freedom comports with his emphasis on the unity of the Trinity having to be secured by eschatological events (so pp. xviii-xix). God's unity is the "eschatological harmony of the Three" (p. 46; see also pp. 57, 113). If God must secure his own identity by his interaction with creatures, in what sense is he free (not compelled by inward lack or outward pressure) in his economic work? Must God do what he does in relation to us in order to become the God he hopes to be? Hinlicky does not consider that an awareness of the prevenient completeness of God is precisely what is needed to confirm the freedom and generosity of God in his engagement of creatures. As Rowan Williams elegantly puts it, "With God alone, I am dealing with what does not need to construct or negotiate an identity, what is free to be itself without the process of struggle. Properly understood, this is the most liberating affirmation we could ever hear. God does not and cannot lay claim upon me so as to 'become' God; what I am cannot be made functional for God's being."[10]

After faulting the "Western" doctrine of simplicity for positing a quaternity with an essence behind the divine persons, Hinlicky does not discuss how his conception of the divine nature as a set of "properties or capacities…at the disposal of God" does not yield a quaternity. What is this set "at the disposal" of the persons? A traditional account of divine simplicity in which the essence and persons are really identical handily eliminates the prospect of a quaternity altogether and ensures that the essence can never hypertrophy into something ontologically prior to or more important than the persons. On page 201 Hinlicky suggests that "epistemic primacy" should be granted to the person of Jesus in the shaping of our understanding of God's unity. But Jesus is not where the canon of Scripture itself begins. He appears as the culminating moment in divine revelation, not the beginning of our understanding of God's unity. Furthermore, if one begins with Scripture (rather than "natural theology"), the biblical authors teach us that God is complete in himself prior to his engagement with creatures (e.g., Ps. 50:12; Jn. 5:26; Acts 17:24-25; Rom. 11:34-35), making "protology"

10. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 72-3.

or prevenience a key element in an authentically Christian doctrine of God. In the Christology of the book, Hinlicky says that "the man Jesus…lives His human life enhypostasized in the divine Son" (p. 133), which is a formally Nestorian assertion. Given his opposition to Nestorianism throughout the book, Hinlicky surely does not mean to advocate Nestorianism, but if the man Jesus (not just the human nature of Jesus) were to subsist in the Son, there would be two persons. Furthermore, Hinlicky writes that Jesus' human nature, his "set of human possibilities" is "hypostasized in the eternal Son." Again, this is a formally Nestorian statement, insofar as it literally affirms that the human nature is made a hypostasis. In an orthodox formulation, the Son's human nature is simply made to subsist in the Son and given its proper manner of subsisting in the Son.

Fifth, there are a number of statements in this book that might, on the one hand, sound inspiring to those already sympathetic to Hinlicky's project and yet, on the other hand, will sound like caricature or mere grandstanding to those who are less convinced. For example:

> Christian theology has to ask whether the philosophical doctrine of divine simplicity is not "simply" vacuous, pointing to a No-Thing. Nor does it help before this question to say that it is precisely supernatural revelation that fills the knowledge gap with supernatural truths about God's personhood and sociality that are beyond reason's grasp. That does not help, because this cut-and-paste job does not survive the vacuity of affirming as divine a timeless self-identity—we know not what. It is betrayed by the ferocious, relentless "power of the negative," as we will see, that debunks not only the idols of the nations but also the biblical God, and in the process misconstrues what is at stake in the contest between the God of the gospel and the idols of the nations (p. xxi).

The "Western" view of the Trinity is somehow made responsible for causing the joy of the new creation to be "muted into a fading memory in the funeral societies today that still bother to call themselves Christian" (p. 26)—a remarkable statement from an author who (rightly) criticizes Radical Orthodoxy's grandiose narrative of Scotus and the decline of the modern world. Divine simplicity prevents Christians from maintaining the already-not-yet tension of biblical eschatology (p. 50). "Western modalism" causes the gospel narrative to be "swallowed up in a pseudoapophatic fog of putative ineffability that is in fact ecclesiastical mystery-mongering" (p. 105). Hinlicky's view differs from a view of simplicity that functions as "an a priori insight into the nature of absoluteness as the reified alpha privative of indivisibility" (p. 123). Many readers will also be very surprised to learn that a Thomistic view of analogical speech will prevent us from clearly speaking out against "Stalin's gulag or the Atlantic slave trade" (pp. 156-7).

In sum, while Hinlicky's book does provide a window into how some thinkers would respond to some traditional articulations of divine simplicity, it does not give us a clear line of argument with which to interact. As a proponent of a broadly Augustinian or Thomistic view of divine simplicity, I would have been happy to interact with serious criticism of that view, one informed by a close reading of primary sources. I would have been happy to interact with a proposal on retrieving other views of simplicity (e.g., from Scotus, Gregory Palamas or Karl Barth). I would have been happy to engage with a thoroughgoing denial of simplicity provided that it took seriously the hard ontological questions associated with affirming divine "complexity." However, to use one of his words, Hinlicky's book ends up giving us a "muddle" that does not really advance conversation about this important topic.