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“In principio”: The Metaphysical Exegesis of John 1:1 by Albert the Great, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas

„In principio”: metafizyczna egzegeza J 1,1 Alberta Wielkiego, Bonawentury i Tomasza z Akwinu

Abstract. The article presents the interpretations of the words “in principio” (John 1:1) provided by Albert the Great, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas in their commentaries on the Gospel of John. Their approaches are different. Albert uses the concepts of the first principle and of the intellect which acts universally and produces its own light. Bonaventure builds his interpretation on Augustine’s distinction between the beginning without beginning and the beginning from the beginning. Aquinas creates a conceptual framework based on metaphysical theories. All three approaches reflect the metaphysical character of the exegesis of John 1:1 performed by these authors. This metaphysical attitude enables them to use advanced concepts and constitutes a basis for calling their exegesis “analytical.”

Streszczenie. Artykuł przedstawia interpretacje słów „in principio” (Jan 1,1) zaproponowane przez Alberta Wielkiego, Bonawenturę i Tomasza z Akwinu w ich komentarzach do Ewangelii wg św. Jana. Ujęcia tych autorów różnią się. Albert używa pojęć pierwszej zasady oraz intelektu, który działa powszechnie i wytwarza swoje światło. Bonawentura buduje swoją interpretację na Augustyńskim rozróżnieniu między początkiem bez początku i początkiem z początku. Akwinata tworzy zaś ramę pojęciową opartą na teoriach metafizycznych. Wszystkie te ujęcia ujawniają metafizyczny charakter dokonanej przez tych autorów egzegezy pierwszego zdania Janowej Ewangelii. Owo metafizyczne nastawienie umożliwiło im zastosowanie zaawansowanych pojęć i stanowi jeden z powodów, by ich egzegezę określić jako „analityczną”.

Keywords: principle, beginning, Gospel of John, Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas.

Słowa kluczowe: zasada, początek, Ewangelia wg św. Jana, Albert Wielki, Bonawentura, Tomasz z Akwinu.

Introduction

The prologue of the Gospel of John is one of the most inspiring Biblical texts. One of the reasons is that it neatly encapsulates the dense theological content bringing together two central mysteries of the Christian faith: the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of Incarnation. So it should not surprise that medieval theologians paid particular attention to this fragment and that their interpretation of this text is still a subject of interest for many scholars.¹

Among those reasons, we can also point out that the first sentence of the Gospel of John includes two crucial terms taken from the metaphysical vocabulary, namely: *arche* (Latin *principium*) and *logos* (translated into Latin as *verbum*). By using the first of them John establishes at least two important references: 1) to the first sentence of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” in which the phrase “in the beginning” was originally expressed in Hebrew as “bereshith,” and translated into Greek as ἐν ἀρχῇ (*en arche*) and into Latin as “in principio”; 2) to the traditional philosophical question about the *arche* (the principle, the beginning, the source, the fundament) of reality. Medieval scholars were aware of the former reference. However, they also took into account the philosophical load of this phrase.

St Albert the Great, St Bonaventure and St Thomas Aquinas stand out among medieval theologians as those who combined the exposition of the Biblical text with careful analysis based on specific analytical tools. It is also important that they composed their commentaries on the Gospel of John in the same period, namely the middle of the 13th century,² and in the same intellectual milieu –

¹ Just to mention a volume devoted to this prologue published in the last decade: Amerini ed. 2014.

² In the period 1248–1276. Specialists agree that Albert composed his commentary between 1270 and 1276 (see: Hofer 2010, 574, n. 23). Bonaventure started writing the main exposition earlier, as a Biblical bachelor (hence, in 1248–1250), and later (“gradually”) added 414 questions (Karris 2007, 1) and probably finished it in 1257 (see: Karris 2006, 319). Thomas is said to have given lectures between 1270 and 1272, which were then collected as

connected with the University of Paris. Hence, we can compare them as theologians working in similar conditions, including the knowledge of Aristotelian metaphysics, logic and methodology, as well as particular patterns connected with the exegetical methods elaborated in that time. Finally, all three thinkers were members of mendicant orders: Bonaventure was a Franciscan and Albert and Thomas were Dominicans. An important context of the mission of these orders were heresies which arose in the 12th and 13th centuries. As we will show, it is not irrelevant in the case of the exegesis of John 1:1.

In this article, we would like to present these theologians' interpretation of the phrase "in principio" within their expositions of John 1:1, and try to explain the similarities and main differences in their approaches. It is intended to be a contribution to the broader discussion on the nature of their Biblical exegesis and its analytical character. Even though many excellent works concerning the commentaries on the Gospel of John by Albert, Bonaventure and Thomas were published,³ according to our knowledge, these tasks have not been undertaken yet.

Although it seems that among the three commentaries on the Gospel of John, that of Bonaventure was the earliest, we start with Albert the Great, as the older author.

1. Albert the Great

In Albert's reading of "In principio erat Verbum," the first and undeniable task is to clarify in which sense one should understand the term "principle." According to Albert, this clause evinces the inseparability of the Word and the intellect of the Father.⁴ Albert reads the "principle" in question (called "the first principle" by him) as the "intellect which acts universally and receives nothing,

a *reportatio* by Reginald of Piperno (see: Keating and Levering 2010, p. ix, and the literature cited there).

³ It is impossible to list all of them; let us indicate only some: Casteigt 2019; Casteigt 2018a; Casteigt 2018b; Clifton Black II 1986; Kręćidło 2017.

⁴ Albertus Magnus, "In Evangelium secundum Joannem luculenta expositio," in *Divi Alberti Magni Ratisbonensis Episcopi ordinis Praedicatorum, Opera Omnia*, vol. 24 (Paris: Vives, 1899) p. 24b: "...per quam ostenditur Verbi ad intellectum paternum inseparabilitas." An English translation of Albert's commentary has not been published yet. All English translations of fragments of this text are our own.

and that is everything that it possesses.”⁵ In the first place, there is a connection between the principle and an intellectual nature. In a second sense, the nature of a principle is inextricably bound to the possibility of generating something that comes from it.⁶

The first thing that proceeds from the first principle is the light of the intellect. Being an intellectual nature, in fact, the first principle produces an act (light) of intellect, through which it is well-known to itself.⁷ As an intellectual nature, it has to both produce and know what it produces, so that the way it reveals itself to itself is by producing an act of intellect (light of intellect).⁸ This is the reason why the Word – by which the principle expresses itself – is inseparable from the whole substance of the principle itself,⁹ although it is distinguished from the principle.

Albert points out that St Augustine confirms such a claim, since he states that when we say “In principio erat Verbum,” the word “principium” refers to the Father (or his intellect), while the preposition “in” indicates the distinction of the person of the Word from the person of the Father. Thus, the Word can be seen as the light in/of the intellect, which is the Father.¹⁰ The Word, then, illuminates what the intellect thinks and produces.

Hence, we can see that Albert is trying to explain in which sense we should understand the “principle.” He defines the principle as what is followed by something, which depends upon the principle. If we consider an intellectual principle, the first thing produced, as its intellectual light, through which the principle manifests itself, we have a principle and something that follows from it. In a particular case, we can have a principle that manifests itself through its

⁵ Ibidem: “Ad hoc autem intelligendum praenotandum est, quod primum principium est intellectus universaliter agens et nihil recipiens, qui est omne quod habet.”

⁶ Ibidem: “Nihil autem principii habet rationem nisi aliquid procedat ab ipso.”

⁷ Ibidem: “Primum autem quod est a principio intellectivo, lux est intelligentiae, qua seipsum manifestat ex seipso.”

⁸ Ibidem: “Cum autem sic se manifestat, non nisi se luce sua declarat: et hoc est intellectum intellectualiter se dicere.”

⁹ Ibidem: “Verbum ergo quo se dicit intellectivum principium, inseparabiliter est in ipso.”

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 24b–25a: “Praepositio autem in (ex eo quod est praepositio, est transitiva, et aliquam notat diversitatem) notat personae Verbi ad Patrem distinctionem. In eo autem quod est haec praepositio in specie accepta, notat continentiam Verbi, tamquam lucis in paterno intellectu.”

own manifestation, and this is the case of the Word, where we necessarily have the co-eternity of the "producer" (Father/intellect) and the "produced" (Word/light). Albert then uses this definition to explain the nature of the Word, which is said to be the very same thing in which the first principle manifests itself. The quotation from Augustine is used to support his reading.

Let us also add that Albert supplements his considerations with a remark on different understandings (*intentiones*) concerning the concept of the principle with respect to God. He raises the following question: why – according to the quoted opinion of Augustine – is the principle understood as the Father, if elsewhere the bishop of Hippo says that the Father is a principle and the Son is a principle, and the Holy Spirit is a principle? Albert answers the question by stating that the true and absolute nature of the active principle is located in the Father, due to the fact that two processes – namely: a person from a person, and a creature from the creator – are formally contained in the Father, since the second process (creatures from creator) requires the first one (the divine persons from the Father) to be completed, and the completion of the first process depends mainly upon the Father.¹¹ In addition, Augustine states that in the Father lies the principle of the whole divinity, so we can say that "principium" can rightly stand for the Father.¹²

Finally, let us note that according to Albert, this first "small sentence" of John 1:1 ("In principio erat Verbum") refers to the inseparability of the Word and the intellect of the Father, whereas the next three "small sentences" show (respectively): the procession of the Word from the first intellect (which distinguishes their properties); the unity of the Word and the Father; the co-equality and co-eternity between the Word and the Father's intellect. Taking it into account, Albert claims that it becomes possible to overcome different kinds of heresy, as will be even more evident in the case of St Bonaventure.¹³

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 25a: "Sed ad hoc dicendum, quod absoluta et prima ratio principii activi non est nisi in Patre. Cum enim duo sint processus: primus scilicet quo persona procedit a persona; et secundus quo creatura procedit a creatore. Primus processus est causa secundi, ut dicit Anselmus. Principium totius processus primi non est nisi in Patre: quia licet Spiritus Sanctus procedat a Filio, tamen hoc Filius habet a Patre; Pater autem est principium, non de principio. Et ideo prima auctoritas principii et prima ratio est in Patre."

¹² Ibidem: "Propter quod dicit Augustinus, quod in Patre est principium totius divinitatis. Et hac ratione antonomastice *principium* supponit Patrem."

¹³ Ibidem, p. 24b: "Et sic omnis confutatur haeretica privitas."

2. Bonaventure

Bonaventure, in turn, does not start his analysis by trying to state the true nature of the principle, in order to mainly grasp which kind of principle is the Word mentioned by the Evangelist (as Albert did). He begins by pointing out that “*In principio erat Verbum*” denotes the unity of the divine essence, and he proposes a similar conclusion using the same passage from Augustine that was considered by Albert the Great. However, while Albert focused on the Augustinian sentence that states that the Father is a principle not from a principle, Bonaventure goes on noting that the same passage also states that the Son is a principle from a principle, and so it is true that “*principium*” should be mainly said about the Father, but the true and broader sense of the Augustinian sentence (“*unde sensus est*”) is that “*in principio*” – namely: in the Father – there is the Son, who is not separated on account of essence from the Father, as John’s Gospel states elsewhere (John 10:30; 14:11).¹⁴

The goal of such a reading is to fight and to exclude the validity of the pagan heresy which considers the Father, the Son and the Spirit to be three gods and not three persons in the unity of a single essence.¹⁵ Thus, Bonaventure’s intention appears to be closer to the clarification of the Christian doctrine against possible mistakes of interpretation, since Bonaventure’s oeuvre is characterized by the repetition of a precise structure (“*quia non intelligunt*”) that serves as a kind of “*repetitional mechanism*” that explains the genesis of each heresy by a defect of the human intellect.

¹⁴ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, “*Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis*,” in *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae, Opera Omnia*, vol. 6 (Firenze: Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi), 1893), c. 1, p. 246b: “*Prima igitur conditio est in essentia unitas, et notatur in prima clausula, cum dicitur In principio erat Verbum; sicut dicit Augustinus ‘Est principium non de principio, et hoc est Pater; et est principium de principio, et hoc Filius’. Hic accipitur principium per antonomasiam de Patre; unde sensus est: In principio, hoc est in Patre, est Filius, non separatus a Patre per essentiam, infra decimo quarto (Io. 14, 44) ‘Ego in Patre, et Pater in me est’ tamquam indivisi; quia sicut dicitur infra decimo (Io. 10, 30): ‘Ego et Pater unum sumus’*”; cf. English translation: St. Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, ed. and trans. Robert J. Karris (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2007), p. 58.

¹⁵ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, “*Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis*,” c. 1, p. 246b: “*Et in hoc liditur infidelitas paganorum, qui nobis indignantur, quod dicimus tres personas, et non tres deos; sicut dicit Augustinus de Agone christiano; et hoc, quia non intelligunt quomodo Verbum erat in principio*”; Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 59.

In fact, Bonaventure continues, the first sentences of John 1 should be treated as a whole, since, while "In principio erat Verbum" serves to exclude the pagan heresies of multiple gods against the Christian unity of the essence, "Verbum erat apud Deum" clarifies the distinction between the divine persons. The preposition "apud," says Bonaventure, should be considered as the element that distinguishes between the authority of the Father and the subordinated authority (*subauctoritas*) of the Son,¹⁶ and so it is the fact that they did not distinguish between the authorities of the Father and the Son that caused the Sabellians to embrace heresy.¹⁷ Again, it is an error of understanding, emphasized by the same formula ("quia non intellexerunt, quomodo Verbum erat apud Deum"), which leads astray yet another group of people. Thus, Bonaventure continues, another heresy can be easily dismissed by the following sentence from John's Gospel: "et Deus erat Verbum." Here we have the equality in their majesty, since, as Anselm states, God is a being than which none greater can be conceived; but, if the Word is God, then the Father and the Son/Word are equal in their majesty.¹⁸ Thus, the Arian heresy is defeated, since its followers wrongly considered the Son as lesser than the Father ("non enim intellexerunt quomodo Deus erat Verbum").¹⁹ Lastly, there is another condition clearly expressed by the Evangelist, with the words

¹⁶ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, "Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis," c. 1, pp. 246b–247a: "Ideo haec praepositio apud importat distinctionem secundum quod praepositio, ratione vero specialis significationis dicit auctoritatem in Patre et subauctoritatem in Filio, quia dicitur minor esse apud maiorem et non e converso, secundum communem modum loquendi. Ibi vero, etsi non sit minus et maius, tamen est auctoritas in Patre et subauctoritas in Filio. Nomine vero verbi intelligitur generationis emanation"; Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, pp. 59–60.

¹⁷ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, "Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis," c. 1, p. 247a: "Et in hoc eliditur haeresis Sabellianorum, qui ponunt quod unus et idem sint Pater et Filius; quia non intellexerunt quomodo *Verbum erat apud Deum*"; Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 60.

¹⁸ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, "Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis," c. 1, p. 247a: "Tertia conditio est in maiestate aequalitas, et haec tangitur in tertia clausula, ibi: *Et Deus erat Verbum*. Si enim, sicut dicit Anselmus 'Deus est quo maius excogitari non potest'; si Verbum erat Deus: ergo erat quo maius excogitari non poterat, et ita in maiestate Patri aequalis erat"; Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 60.

¹⁹ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, "Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis," c. 1, p. 247a: "Et in hoc eliditur haeresis Arianorum, qui posuerunt Filium creaturam et minorem Patre, sicut dicit Augustinus. Non enim intellexerunt quomodo *Deus erat Verbum*"; Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, pp. 60–61.

“Hoc erat in principio apud Deum,” namely, the fact that the divine persons are co-eternal,²⁰ meaning that the heresies of the Ebionites and the Photinians can be easily dismissed.²¹ Also in this case, it is an error in interpretation that leads to a heretical mistake (“non enim intellexerunt quomodo Verbum erat in principio apud Deum”).

This holistic anti-heretic approach corresponds to Bonaventure’s introductory note to John 1:1 which points out that the “small sentences” which constitute this passage should be considered together, as they “describe the incarnate Word relative to four qualities, which are: unity in essence; dissimilarity in person; equality in majesty; co-eternity in duration.”²² This shows that although Bonaventure does not provide a deeper analysis concerning the concept of the principle, he considers it within a definitely metaphysical perspective.

3. Thomas Aquinas

In order to explain how we should understand the phrase “in the beginning,” Aquinas takes into account a variety of meanings of the Latin term *principium*. His procedure is aimed at looking for senses which are appropriate for the context of the Word of God. However, as it will turn out later, he does not assume that only one of them is fitting.

²⁰ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, “Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis,” c. 1, p. 247a: “Quarta conditio, in duratione coaeternitas, et haec tangitur, cum dicitur: *Hoc erat in principio apud Deum*, in quo notatur coaeternitas. Nam Deus Pater ab aeterno erat; quodsi Filius non erat coaeternus, ante fuit Pater quam Filius: non ergo Verbum erat in principio apud Deum; sed erat in principio, et ideo coaeternum”; Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 61.

²¹ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, “Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis,” c. 1, pp. 247a–b: “Et in hoc eliditur haeresis Photinianorum et Ebionitarum, qui dixerunt Christum ex Maria prorsus sumsisse exordium, sicut dicit Augustinus de Agone christiano”; Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 61.

²² Bonaventura de Balneoregio, “Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis,” c. 1, p. 246a: “In prima parte ponuntur quatuor clausulae, quibus describitur Verbum incarnatum quantum ad quatuor conditiones, quae sunt: in essentia unitas, in persona alietas, in maiestate aequalitas, in duratione coaeternitas. Et per has conditiones eliduntur quatuor errores”; Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 58.

Aquinas points out that “according to Origen, the word ‘*principium*’ has many meanings.”²³ The editors of the English translation have supplemented this remark and rightly enumerated those meanings, namely: “principle,” “source,” and “beginning.” However, Thomas proposes a further division. He notes down that “the word ‘*principium*’ implies a certain order of one thing to another,” so “one can find a *principium* in all those things which have an order.”²⁴ He indicates four kinds of orders:

- found in quantified things (*principium* is a principle of number and lengths, e.g., a line);
- found in time (*principium* is a beginning of time or duration);
- found in learning (as to nature: *principium* of wisdom (Christian doctrine) is Christ as the Word of God; as to ourselves: Christ inasmuch as the Word became flesh);
- found in the production of a thing, where two perspectives should be taken into account:
 - on the part of the thing generated or made (the first part of a thing, e.g., “the foundation is the beginning of a house”);
 - on the part of the generator, where three principles occur:
 - of intention (*principium*: the purpose);
 - of reason (*principium*: the idea in the mind of the maker);
 - of execution (*principium*: the operative faculty).

This framework enables Aquinas to classify three possible meanings of *principium* in the commented sentence. It can be understood as: 1) the Person of the Son, 2) the Person of the Father, 3) the beginning of duration. He does not state it explicitly, but it seems clear that the first two meanings refer to the order of production on the part of the generator. The Person of the Son is “the principle of creatures by reason of his active power acting with wisdom, which is the conception of the things that are brought into existence.”²⁵ And

²³ Sancti Thomae de Aquino, *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, ed. R. Cai (Romae: Taurini, 1952), l. 1, n. 34; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 1–5*, trans. Fabian Larcher, James A. Weisheipl, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), p. 17.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Thomas de Aquino, *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, l.1, nn. 35; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 18.

the Person of the Father is “the principle not only of creatures, but of every divine process.”²⁶

Thomas underlines that both approaches are plausible. First, they are confirmed by the Scriptures. As regards the Son as the principle, he invokes two passages: 1 Cor. 1:24: “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God,” and John 8:25, where Christ speaks about himself: “the source, who also speaks to you” (“ego principium, qui et loquor vobis”). And regarding the Father he quotes Ps 110:3: “yours is princely power in the day of your birth” (“tecum principium in die virtutis tuae”). Second, he shows that both options make sense. In the first case, we obtain: “Word was in the Son.” He claims that it means that “the Word himself is the principle, in the sense in which life is said to be in God, when this life is not something other than God.”²⁷ In the second case, we have: “The Son was in the Father.” Aquinas indicates that this meaning is related to the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, and that such a formula is expressed later in the Gospel of John in Christ’s famous utterance: “I am in the Father, and the Father in me” (John 14:10). Finally, Thomas reminds us that both options were accepted by Origen²⁸ and the second one was adopted by St Augustine.

The third sense of *principium* refers obviously to the order found in time. In this perspective, the analyzed passage means that “the Word was before all things,” no matter what kind of things and what measure is taken into account. It refers both to the things which exist in time (temporal ones) and to aeviternal ones (the aeon). This priority means that the Word is eternal. This interpretation is also supported by a Biblical passage (Prov 8:23: “the Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made anything” – “...antequam quicquam faceret a principio”) and by the authority of the Church Fathers, such as Basil, Augustine, and Hilary.

If we refer to the above-mentioned framework presented by Aquinas, we can see that he leaves aside two other orders. It is understandable that for Thomas the Word is not a principle within a quantitative order. That would be possible only if he accepted some kind of Pythagorean metaphysics. However, it is interesting

²⁶ Thomas de Aquino, *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, l.1, nn. 36; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 18.

²⁷ Thomas de Aquino, *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, l.1, nn. 35; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 18.

²⁸ About Aquinas’s reception of Origen’s thought and the difficulties connected to this issue, see: Vijgen 2019.

that he did not include any understanding related to the order found in learning, despite the fact that he gave an example of Christ as a Word of God which is a principle of wisdom. Thus, it seems that he did not want to read "In principio erat Verbum" within this order. A possible explanation of this fact is that, in his interpretation of this clause, he adopted a purely metaphysical perspective. Furthermore, perhaps he noticed a possible complication of such an understanding of this sentence, as it would imply the sense: in the Word there was the Word, and he simply decided to avoid additional unnecessary considerations.

Although Aquinas did not include all the possible senses of *principium*, it does not mean that he wanted to grasp only one of them or the best one. Aquinas shows that the three understandings which he presented as fitting for John 1:1 do not exclude each other. They are complementary. Furthermore, all of them are important from the theological and metaphysical points of view. As he states, "the first explanation asserts the causality of the Word; the second explanation affirms the consubstantiality of the Word with the Father, who utters the Word; and the third explanation affirms the co-eternity of the Word."²⁹ This means that one Biblical passage may have many different meanings, and they can all be correct.

Next, let us see that the division according to the order of production is based on one of the most important Aristotle's theories, namely: the theory of four primary causes. Stagirite distinguished: formal cause ("essence or essential nature" – οὐσία καὶ τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι), material cause ("the matter of substrate" – ὑποκείμενον), efficient cause ("the source of motion", literally: "the principle of motion" – ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κινήσεως) and final cause ("the purpose or good" and "the end of every process" – τέλος).³⁰ Aquinas's principle of intention corresponds to (or simply: is) the final cause, the principle of reason: to the formal cause, and the principle of execution: to efficient cause. The material cause, in turn, could be located in the order of production on the part of the thing generated or made.

Finally, we should make an additional remark and note down that when Thomas presents the interpretation according to which the principle can stand for the Person of the Son, he underlines the "active power" of this Person. He

²⁹ Thomas de Aquino, *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, l.1, n. 38: "secundum primam expositionem, asseritur Verbi causalitas; secundum autem secundam, Verbi consubstantialitas ad Patrem, qui Verbum loquitur; secundum vero tertiam, Verbi coaeternitas"; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 19.

³⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 3, 983a; Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vols.17, 18, translated by Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1933, 1989.

claims that it is a principle of creatures, literally, “secundum rationem virtutis activae, et per modum sapientiae, quae est ratio eorum quae fiunt.”³¹ If we refer to the initial conceptual framework provided by Thomas, we can ask: is it a principle “of reason” (“principium rationis” – so it would be “the idea in the mind of the maker” – “ipsa forma in mente artificis”), or rather the principle of execution (“principium executionis,” which is “the operative faculty” – “potentia operans”)? It seems that Aquinas’s emphasis on the active role of such a principle excludes an interpretation which would accept only the first option. Thus, it rules out a concept of Logos which would be a mere residuum of ideas/forms. Although it may contain them, at the same time it plays an active role in the act of creation, which is clear with respect to the common theological theory according to which the whole Trinity takes part in the work of creation. Of course, Aquinas could say something similar about the Holy Spirit which could be presented as a principle of intention (so the good and love for which the world has been created, as described at least by St Augustine³²), which at the same time has an active power as co-creator. However, it seems it would be an unnecessary complication.

Conclusions

The interpretations provided by Albert, Bonaventure, and Thomas concerning the concept of the principle in John 1:1 are different. However, they are coherent. What is most important, they all represent a metaphysical approach in Biblical exegesis. Albert combines the term “principium” with the concepts of the first principle and of the intellect which acts universally and produces its own light. Bonaventure builds his interpretation on Augustine’s two concepts of the principle or the beginning: the beginning without beginning and the beginning from the beginning. Aquinas decides to create a conceptual framework, using mainly Aristotle’s theory of four causes. All three theologians, however, try to interpret the concept of the principle within a metaphysical perspective.

³¹ Thomas de Aquino, *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, l.1, nn. 35; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 18.

³² Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XI, 24: “...eadem nobis insinuata intellegatur trinitas, unamquamque creaturam quis fecerit, per quid fecerit, propter quid fecerit”, eds B. Dombart, A. Kalb, *CCL* 48, p. 343 (*PL* 41, p. 338).

Also, all of them pointed out the metaphysical relationships which relate to God and mostly to the Divine Persons (Albert: inseparability, procession and distinction, essential unity, co-eternity; Bonaventure: unity, dissimilarity, equality, co-eternity; Thomas: causality with respect to creatures, consubstantiality, co-eternity). However, let us emphasize it, their approaches are slightly different: e.g., with respect to "In principio erat Verbum" Albert emphasizes inseparability, Bonaventure – unity, and Aquinas indicates the three above-mentioned relationships. Bonaventure also decides to develop this topic to show its anti-heresy potential (Albert shares this attitude without developing it; Thomas does not mention this topic at all).

To conclude, we should note that the obviously metaphysical approach of the exegesis by Albert, Bonaventure, and Thomas is shaped by the theological tradition of the Christian West. However, it seems that the development of metaphysical thought in the 13th century gave them a new perspective which enabled them to prepare more advanced metaphysical analyses. In particular, it prompted Aquinas to base his exegesis on a conceptual framework which he created on a foundation which was clearly metaphysical in character. We thus consider these theologians' metaphysical approach to be an important element of the analytical dimension of their Biblical exegesis.

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