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Contemplating Procession: Thomas Aquinas' Analogy of the Procession of the Word in the Immanent Divine Life

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Abstract

Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian theology has been criticized as proposing an abstract notion of God that is divorced from salvation history and that is supported by tedious and ultimately incomprehensible explication. By showing the goals and limitations of Thomas' approach and by analyzing one element of his theology, it will be shown that these criticisms are unfounded. Specifically, this article will attempt to analyze Aquinas' view of the procession of the Word, or act of "generation," in the divine immanent life. It can be seen that Aquinas actually provides a metaphysical analogy for contemplating generation that avoids heresy and that absolutely integrates the economic and immanent lives of the Trinity.

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<div align="center">INTRODUCTION</div>

Thomas Aquinas' infusion of Aristotelian philosophy into speculative theology has long been a topic of debate and many have criticized his approach to Trinitarian theology specifically, dismissing it for a number of reasons. Karl Rahner's criticism is of a supposed Thomistic separation of the two treatises on the Trinity that produces a theology *On the One God* and a theology *On the Triune God*.[1] Similarly, Catherine LaCugna has suggested that Aquinas presents a dichotomized theology in which the three-personness of the one God is a theological afterthought.[2] Accordingly, it has been argued that Aquinas' abstract metaphysical language entails a conception of the Trinity that is divorced from salvation history and thereby cannot be reconciled with the God revealed in Scripture. Still others have asserted that the technical elements of his Trinitarian thought are simply incomprehensible.[3]

This one thing is for certain—Aquinas' approach does indeed attempt to tackle what is perhaps the loftiest subject in all of theology and the complexities of his assertions reflect this. For him, the doctrine of "The Blessed Trinity" finds its starting point in the question of origins in the godhead. Related to this question is the issue of divine procession and one of the two processions, as discussed in the *Summa Theologica*, will be considered in this work. Namely, it is the intent of this paper to analyze Aquinas' theological approach to the procession of the Son from the Father within the immanent divine life and thereby demonstrate that concerning the issue of the procession of the Word, these criticisms are unwarranted.

By assessing this aspect of Thomistic theology, it can be seen that the critics of Thomas miss his goals in contemplating the Trinity. Moreover, his doctrine of procession demonstrates the deep connection between the immanent Trinity and God's economic work in salvation history. Despite the technical language, Aquinas provides a contemplation that is as comprehensible as can be expected given the inherent limitations of the subject. These limitations, concerning both that of speculative theology on whole and those specific to the topic of procession, will be proposed. His specific theory of the procession of the Word, or "generation," will then be assessed. Lastly, the final section will explain the importance of the relations of individual persons that are involved in generation as well as the economic outcome of the reality of procession.

<div align="center">LIMITATIONS OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY</div>

Trinitarian theology is severely limited by finitude. As Karen Kilby argues, many of the technical elements of Aquinas' proposals should be understood as "the

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[1] Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 16-20.

[2] Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Publishing, 1991), 143-165.

[3] For further detailed analysis of these criticisms, see Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Company, 2004), 23-46.

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dead-end of theology." This is not to say that his arguments lead one to a "dead-end," but rather that Trinitarian theology, especially Aquinas' particular brand, reaches the very limits of what theology can do and say. There is a real sense in which he is pushing the grasp of finite language as far as it may reach.[4] An inability to fully comprehend the extent of the Father-Son relationship is therefore expected. Moreover, an inerrant explication of generation must ultimately be conceded to be an impossible task for those limited by finite language.

Unavoidable Analogy in Procession Language

According to Aquinas, the theologian must rely upon the use of analogy anytime he refers to the divine existence. This is seen in his explanation of the names of God in question 13 of the *Summa Theologica*. In referring to any attribute or name of God, there is a difference between the perfection of the attribute that is being referred to and the mode of signification through which the person has epistemic access to the attribute.[5]

For example, in the instance of divine goodness, the way in which one comes to speak of "goodness" is by the linguistic designation of an action or person as being "good"—its mode of signification. However, words are forged in an environment of created realities and are molded by one's relationship with finite creatures. The issue then is that God embodies goodness *perfectly* and it is identical to His nature. This is unique to God's nature alone. Words are thereby to be understood as the signifiers of this divine aspect but this mode of signification does not have the ability to fully communicate the perfect goodness seen in God. The created order participates in the goodness of God by virtue of its relationship to God; however creatures do not possess the quality of goodness apart from God and even still, they may only refer to *perfect* goodness on the basis of their own limited experiences. Thus, the word "goodness" imperfectly signifies the perfect goodness seen in God's being. The words forged from creation may refer to a quality of God, but they only do so analogously.[6]

This same sort of analogy must be applied to other language used of God such as God as possessing *personhood, paternity, filiation,* and *wisdom.* Aquinas writes in question 29 of the *Summa Theologica, "*Hence, since everything that is perfect must be attributed to God, forasmuch as His essence contains every perfection, this name 'person' is fittingly applied to God; not, however, as it is applied to creatures, but in a more excellent way; as other names also…"[7] Here even personhood may

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[4] Karen Kilby, "Aquinas, the Trinity, and the Limits of Understanding," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 4 (2005): 414.

[5] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.6.

[6] Giles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 107-8. This is to say that the mode of signification is not equivalent to God's existence but it is merely the vessel by which one may understand God's being. It is analogous, not equivocal or univocal to God's existence.

[7] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.29.3.

rightfully be ascribed to God, but this personhood is greater still than what is meant when a human being is deemed a "person." God possesses the perfection of this attribute of which man may only comprehend and define in relation to God's divine existence. The difficulty is that in using the term "person" to explain who God is, the theologian has no other point of reference, tangible or otherwise, by which to think of all that personhood might entail except his own personhood, which is deficiently similar to God's perfect existence.

Likewise, language referring to the processions presents this same analogical challenge and Aquinas sought to determine what kind of analogy might most accurately explain the type of processions that occur within the Trinity.[8] The analogy would need to avoid the pitfalls of the heretics that he discussed in question 27 of the *Summa Theologica*. Arius, the subordinationist, had proposed that perhaps the Son proceeds from the Father as the "primary creature" of creation. Sabellius, the modalist, claimed that "God the Father is called Son in assuming flesh from the Virgin."[9] Against these heretical claims, Aquinas needed a way to grasp the processions through an analogy that could maintain the consubstantiality of the three persons and also convey their individuality and co-eternality.

Though Aquinas indeed settled on an analogy, the limitations are nevertheless obvious. It is in the nature of analogy that only certain elements of the subject being analogized are communicated. So, even the best possible analogy can only provide insight into the event of procession in certain ways. It should not be concluded that an attempt to grasp procession will be fruitless though. Rather, one should conclude that the success of such an attempt should not be measured by whether or not an analogy provides an altogether exact portrayal of the totally unique event in the Trinity; such nomenclature quite simply does not exist. Though the deficiency of analogical language is limiting, this does not exclude the possibility of proposing an analogy with reasonable explanatory power.

The Necessity of Special Revelation

Knowledge of the Trinity requires special revelation. This is to say that had God not revealed Himself as triune through revelation, mankind would be completely ignorant to this aspect of God's nature. As Emery has pointed out, God's allowance of epistemic access to this fact was not without purpose.[10] Namely, through God's communication of His triune existence, mankind might enjoy a more complete understanding of God's redemptive plan in creation and the soteriological implications this entails. Mankind may conclude that the universe was created by the generated Word of God and that God did not create out of necessity to His existence. He is not added-to or subtracted-from by creation.[11]

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[8] John F. Wippel, "Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, eds. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 87.

[9] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* 1.27.1.

[10] Emery, *Trinitarian*, 7-11.

[11] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.1.

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The limitation here is that though special revelation does not contradict reason, reason alone is not enough to ascertain these characteristics of the divine existence. In question 12 of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas asserts that natural reasoning can know God inasmuch as mankind's sensibilities allow him to comprehend God's existing as the first cause and possessing the essential qualities of the first cause. Natural reasoning can thus conclude that God exists, but cannot aspire to know the full power of God, which is not manifested completely in creation.[12] He posits that the creative power that is apparent within all of creation—that power that allows one to conclude that God is the first cause—is common among all the members of the godhead. These powers include divine causality, but even divine causality is common amongst each of the three persons. Since this is the case, the theologian has no way of differentiating between the three through natural theology alone.[13]

Thusly, the theologian is forced to build a Trinitarian theology from the starting point of the propositions of Scripture. It is ultimately to one's advantage to possess the special insights of this revelation to which he would otherwise not be privy. Nevertheless, in Trinitarian thought, philosophy may only attempt to further expound upon special revelation. That is, if the assertions regarding the Trinity in Scripture are taken as a datum, reason can make progress in clarifying, unpacking, and drawing conclusions from its claims.[14] However, ultimately, the extent to which it might elaborate on these propositions is limited as reason alone cannot hope to discover much new information about an infinite divine immanent life without further revelation. This is why the scope of Aquinas' Trinitarian theology should be thought of as a demonstration of the reasonability of the Trinitarian claims of Scripture.

The Goals of Thomas' Trinitarian Contemplation

As Copleston puts it, "Of an infinite being we can have but a finite and analogical natural knowledge, precisely because we ourselves are finite; but a finite and imperfect knowledge is not the same as no knowledge at all."[15] Given the limitations, the goal of Aquinas' Trinitarian theology could rightfully be said to fall in line with the posture of "faith seeking understanding." He nuances his desire for "understanding" by purporting two usages of reason. Reason might be utilized to provide proof of a fundamental proposition or it might be used to show "that consequent effects are congruent with something fundamental that has already

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[12] Ibid, 1.12.12.

[13] Ibid, 1.32.1. For further discussion on this topic, see Norman Kretzmann, "Trinity and Transcendentals," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement:Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald Feenstra (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 79–109.

[14] Kretzmann, "Trinity and Transcendentals," 80-81.

[15] Frederick Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy: From Augustine to Duns Scotus*, A History of Philosophy (New York, NY: Doubleday Publishing, 1993), 2:397.

been posited. . ."[16] It is the first use of reason that is utilized to demonstrate the oneness of God, but the second use is utilized in Trinitarian theology as it provides the necessary vehicle to assess the congruency of fundamental claims.[17] This is the type of *understanding* Aquinas sought to provide in speculating about generation.

Moreover, his Trinitarian theology is meant to be contemplative in nature. He sought to make the truths of Scripture more articulate for the believer, using a reasoned faith to do so. He sought to discern the deep meaning of the text and, in doing so, distance it from the errors of the heretics. He uses this language of contemplation even throughout his commentaries. Chief among them in dealing with the topic of the Trinity is his commentary on the Gospel of John. He says of the evangelist John that "The contemplation of John was full, high, and perfect."[18] John's contemplation is high in that it contemplates true, deep knowledge of the Lord, it was full in that John was able to comprehend the effects of the first cause, and it is perfect in that it was led by the subject of the contemplation. In this way, Thomas asserts that Scripture actually *instructs* the reader to engage in a theology of contemplation.[19]

Aquinas goes so far as to say that the contemplative life is even more meritorious than the active life as the contemplative life focuses its attention on the love of God. This focus is a greater act than focusing attention on the actions of men, or the love of man.[20] This contemplative, and speculative, element within his work demonstrates that Aquinas in both the *Summa Theologica* and his commentaries on Scripture sought to present a contemplation that was every bit a spiritual exercise, in thinking of the divine existence, as it was a doctrinal treatise. It has even been suggested that the works of Aquinas are even more spiritual than they are rigorously doctrinal.[21]

Taking this into account, as well as all of the limitations prior mentioned, it can be seen that Aquinas did not presume to submit a treatise that is void of any elements of ineffability; again, such a task is inconceivable in matters concerning the Trinity. Instead, he sought to provide an analogy that the person of faith can use to better articulate the Trinity in a reasonable, consistent manner, and in a worshipful posture, attempt to "understand" the propositions of revelation concerning generation as much as human language might permit.

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[16] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 32.1.2.

[17] Kretzmaan, "Trinity and Transcendentals," 81.

[18] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher and James A. Weisheipl, ed. Daniel A. Keating and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 3.

[19] Ibid, 1-6.

[20] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2.2.182.1.

[21] For an elaboration of this focus on spiritual development in Aquinas' theological works, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003) and Peter Drilling, "The Psychological Analogy of the Trinity: Augustine, Aquinas, and Lonergan," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 71 3 (2006): 327-331.

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THE EXISTENCE OF PROCESSIONS

Before Aquinas' theory of generation is introduced, it may be helpful to first present Thomas' *modus operandi* in contemplating procession. He looked to the language of Scripture to provide the parameters to which an analogy of procession would need to adhere.

At the very outset of his contemplation, Aquinas quotes John 8:42 in which Jesus says "From God I proceeded."[22] His commentary on this passage includes a description of Jesus' "proceeding and coming forth from God."[23] This is but one example of numerous comments within his commentary on John, especially the prologue, that include this emphasis. For Aquinas, not only does the language of the Gospels imply Jesus' keen self-awareness of His Messianic identity and deity, but the writer's language issues descriptors of Christ's procession. Thus, he is bound by procession language because the Gospel writers used it.

Furthermore, Aquinas claimed that the names of God signify that a procession has taken place.[24] "It is customary in Scripture for the things signified to be themselves called by the names of their signs," says Thomas.[25] This can be seen in the significance of John's decision to refer to the second person of the Trinity as the "Word." This Word in John's prologue cannot refer to a man's linguistic expression or an angelic word since both these possess a cause and principle of their existence. Instead, this Word exists as God Himself. It could not have been made, since all things are made from it. More shall be said about Aquinas' reading of the title "Word" in a following section. However, preliminarily it is pertinent to say that Scripture's use of "Word" to refer to Christ indicates that God wished this procession to be known to man and this is made definitively clear by this title's inherent revelatory implications.[26]

A second name of the second person of the godhead that signifies procession is the name "Son." This is the most popular name of the second person in all of Scripture. Distinctively Trinitarian passages in the New Testament that utilize this name are copious. For example, Matthew 1 states that "No one knows the Son but the Father: neither doth anyone know the Father but the Son."[27] Hebrews 1 claims "God, who, at sundry times and in divers manners, spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all in these days hath spoken to us by His Son."[28] It is from these passages that Aquinas needed to construct his analogy.

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[22] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.27.1.

[23] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 8.5.

[24] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 27.1.

[25] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John,* 1.1.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.2.

[28] Ibid.

<center>THE ANALOGY OF THE WORD</center>

Aquinas proposed that an ideal analogy could be found by returning to the language of Scripture. Specifically, generation could best be described by considering the title "Word." As has been stated, this title is essentially revelatory. As such, it was supremely attractive to Aquinas in providing a foundation for modeling an analogy of generation. In ferreting out his proposal, the following sections will explain the important distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity, present the theory itself, consider the composition of the perfect generation event, and finally explain how he managed to avoid heresy.

The Distinction of "Immanent Trinity" and Procession

Perhaps the most important distinction to be made in procession theology is that between the economic and immanent Trinity. The economic Trinity refers to those actions of God that relate to His creation. It refers to God as He interacts with mankind in salvation history. These actions are non-essential to His being and they are not to be considered a part of God Himself. They are actions that correspond to "external matter."[29] Closely related to this idea of an economic Trinity is the idea of external processions. Such a procession goes out from something to become a thing that is external from the origin from whence it came. Perhaps the best example of such a procession would be the emanation of heat from a flame. The heat emanates out and away from its origin, becoming something *other than* its origin.[30]

The immanent, or "psychological," Trinitarian actions refer to God's actions *in se*, in Himself. These actions are actions in which God "acts upon" God. They should be considered of an intellectual nature and thusly they are immaterial.[31] In other words, the immanent life involves actions that are "transitive," and never are transmitted to the outside of God's being. By asserting that the Trinity possesses this immanent life, one may claim that God is composed of an active intellect of the highest form that does not require any external actions in order to exercise that intellect. This is true because to say that external actions are necessary for an actively intellectual being is to say that such a being is dependent on the external.[32]

Closely related to the immanent life of the Trinity is the notion of intellectual processions. As Rowan says of external processions, "Procession is associated with movement towards something external, says Aquinas, and such movement is inadmissible where God is concerned."[33] Another category of processions is needed in order to explain the types of processions that occur in God. Since God is intellectual, or immanent, one may likewise claim that He is conscious. This

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[29] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* 1.27.1.
[30] Ibid*,* 1.27.1.
[31] Rowan Williams, "What Does Love Know? St Thomas on the Trinity," *New Blackfriars Journal* 82 964 (2001): 262.
[32] Emery, *Trinitarian*, 40-41.
[33] Williams, *What Does Love Know*, 261.

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consciousness entails a movement and consequently an origin of that movement, but this is a movement only within the Trinity itself.[34] So, intellectual processions refer to those processions that occur inwardly within the subject. The intellectual actions that take place within God are identical to God Himself. Aquinas says, "…the substance of the divine intellect must be its very act of understanding, and this is the act of the intellect."[35] To claim that the procession of the Word occurs on the interior of God's being is to say that the intellectual procession that occurs is itself God. Moreover, since God is immutable as He is without potentiality, any such processions that occur in Himself, and as Himself, must be an eternal procession. [36]

The Theory of Generation Presented

At the very heart of Aquinas' analogy is his theory of generation, which must entail an interior action. If he postulated generation as an exterior action, then Christ is reduced to a creation of the creator.[37] The theory states that divine procession is analogous to mankind's generation of word within its own understanding. He first draws a distinction between the vocal sound used to express a word and that which the vocal sound expresses. When one speaks, one is actually only signifying the product of one's thought, the *verbum*, or inner word. However, this is not to say that the external vocalized word is the procession of the inner word. Again, it merely signifies it.[38] This is to say that "the structure of something's active reality directly appears in the structure of language."[39] The inner word that is a product of one's conception of a thing exists whether or not it is given acknowledgment by a vocalized word. To elaborate, one may have a thought life that is full of conceptions, and *verbums*, but these conceptions are never known to anyone other than one's own self if they are not communicated outwardly.[40]

Aquinas claims that this inner word, or "word of the heart," does in fact proceed within one's intellect. Essentially, he postulates that there are three elements present in man's intellect. A person's intellectual powers interact with the knowledge of a thing and its species to produce an understanding of a thing. This understanding could rightfully be called a procession. Moreover, there is a sense in which this action is considered one unified process. That is to say that this procession process occurs immanently within the godhead as a single event.[41]

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[34] Ibid, 261-262.

[35] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.11.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Levering, *Metaphysics*, 154.

[38] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1.1.

[39] Williams, *Love*, 262.

[40] Kilby, *Limitations*, 419.

[41] Aquinas, *Commentary on John*, 1-6.

Qualifying Perfect Generation

Aquinas does qualify his word analogy by stating that "intellectual natures are of three kinds: human, angelic and divine…"[42] Even though the divine intellect, which exists in an infinite form, is likened to the human intellectual processes, it follows that concerning analogies of human generation, even "the similitudes derived from these fall short in the representation of divine objects."[43] Thus, the generation of the divine Word is nuanced accordingly. Since language could not posit a univocal description of God, Aquinas nuanced the analogy by demonstrating how things were related to Him and he asserted what a perfect generational event must *not* entail.

Thomas needed to utilize certain aspects of other generational events in order to postulate what the perfect generation would entail, or not entail. He looked to a generation in which all can relate—the birth of a son. The birth of a human being was chosen purposefully because animals, when they are born, do not inherit qualities of sonship. Thus, human birth is the preferred analogy as it allows a more similar notion to divine procession.[44] So, when a human is born, the newborn child proceeds from potentiality to an actual life. He suggests that something similar occurs within the divine life, but the divine procession does not include a creation from nothing to actuality. Instead, the divine procession has always been. Moreover, it is true that a human son possesses a nature that is similar to his father, but this is not to say that he possesses the identical nature of his father. When generation occurs within God, however, the Son does possess a nature identical to the Father.[45]

Aquinas said that the "more perfectly something proceeds, the more closely it is one with the source from whence it proceeds."[46] Certainly, the procession of the Word is a perfect generation from its source and therefore the proceeded Word is perfectly related to the unbegotten Father. Herein lies the limitation of the analogy that must be conceded. As Kilby sums up best, "Thomas is presenting us with a procession that is so perfect that we in fact have no idea why it could not also be called 'not a procession.'"[47] The issue is whether or not this "perfect" generation can be rightfully deemed a procession since these other generations offered as examples do not possess the perichoretic relationship that is seen in divine procession. However, again, Aquinas is piecing together an analogy that demonstrates the reasonability of the propositions of Scripture. He draws from other generational events precisely because there is no other event that provides the perfect parallel. Indeed, the divine procession is its own type.

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* 1.27.1

[44] Ibid*,* 1.27.2.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid, 1.27.1

[47] Kilby, *Limitations*, 420.

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Contra Arius and Sabellius

The analogy of the Word solves the problems that are apparent in the works of Arius. According to Arian thought, the unity of God precludes the diversity seen in orthodox Trinitarian theology and Christ was pictured as a "first creature."[48] Aquinas believed that Arius' theory was "manifestly repugnant to divine Scripture."[49] He responded to Arius by first positing a superior analogy and then addressing Arius' scriptural errors. Under Aquinas' model, an interior procession allows one to retain the doctrine of divine simplicity. Since there is no outward emanation, consubstantiality is therefore retained. Since the procession is an eternal event, he maintains co-eternality as well. In regards to Arius' appeals to Scripture, Aquinas replied by suggesting that the hermeneutical principle of allowing "Scripture to read Scripture" should be employed. In using this principle, the biblical names of Christ, the attribute of sonship ascribed to Him, along with Johannine theology are enough to determine that Arius' reading of the text is fallacious.[50]

Sabellius' approach evoked an equally problematic assertion and Aquinas addressed this heresy in a similar fashion.[51] He responded that Sabellianism essentially asserts that to call Christ the "Son of God" is tantamount to saying that the Father possesses an additional property of sonship. He asked why then would Scripture choose to use the term "son" if in no meaningful sense does the term apply. If there is no three-personness of God, then the use of this type of analogical language in Scripture is simply unwarranted. Moreover, Aquinas again stands behind explicit Johannine statements to demonstrate the inadequacies of this heresy.[52] There is little doubt that he held Scripture as authoritative in this regard, but he nevertheless advocated that biblical exegesis required a level of metaphysical understanding.[53] Though his metaphysical explanation did encounter certain difficulties in comprehension, it ultimately did not face the charges of heresy that alternate theories did.

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[48] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.6.

[49] Ibid*, 4.7.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Sabellius denied any diversity in the godhead and postulated that the Father, as the one God, had become the Son at the point of conception. Under the old covenant, God manifested in the mode of the Father, but under the new covenant, He had taken up sonship in the mystery of the incarnation. All attributes granted to the Son should therefore be attributed to the Father. Namely, the Father "was the son of the Virgin, conceived and born of her, that He suffered, died and rose again, and all else which the Scriptures say of Christ in the flesh." Ibid*, 4.5.

[52] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.5.

[53] Levering, *Metaphysics,* 154.

RELATION AND PROCESSION

In Aquinas' theology, it was essential to uphold the doctrine of divine simplicity and he therefore maintained that the essence of the divine is indivisible.[54] Thus, one divine person is not distinguished from another except by what he deemed "opposing relations." These relations are distinguished on the basis of origin and origin is only distinguished through the processions.[55] Like the Trinity itself, the study of the Trinity must be taken as "all as one" and "one as all." In other words, a study of the processions is also in some sense a study of the persons and their relations. So, the theory of relative opposition, the person of the Son, the person of the Father, and the economy of generation are all pertinent to grasping Aquinas' analogy.

The Theory of Relative Opposition

The names of the divine persons in Scripture provide the reader with some insight into the persons themselves, and certain names provide further insight into relations amongst the persons. These are subsistent relations and therefore they are not to be considered "accidents" in the Aristotelian sense.[56] Once this is granted, Aquinas' theory of relative opposition follows. This theory takes into account the distinctions drawn in the names with the goals being to determine the distinction between the persons and a "principle of distinction" by which those persons involved in procession are known. Preliminarily, it should be noted that the theory does not say that there is an opposing force between members of the Trinity. Rather, it states that one person engenders while the other is the engendered. This engendering occurs as an intellectual, immaterial, eternal action within the godhead.[57]

According to Aquinas, there are four types of opposition that can be expressed. First, there is an opposition between affirmation and negation. An example of this type would include the opposition between being and non-being. However, this cannot be the type of opposition that occurs in the Trinity as the persons do not negate one another. Second, there is the opposition of privation and habit which refers to the distinction between something that is perfect and that which is imperfect. Obviously, this opposition cannot be applied to the Trinity as it would imply inequality amongst the persons. Third, there is the opposition of contrariety but this cannot be used to describe the Trinity as it implies diversity amongst things.

Fourth, there is relative opposition which is founded on either quantity or action and passion. The opposition within the Trinity cannot be understood as a relative opposition of quantity because one person cannot be considered "more" or

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[55] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles,* 4.24.
[56] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.28.2.
[57] Emery, *Trinitarian*, 97-100.

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"less" than another. However, Aquinas suggests that there is a relative opposition of action and passion that occurs within the Trinity. An example of this type is that between "master and servant, mover and moved, father and son." However, to be even more specific, in order to make sure that Aquinas does not imply that one person of the Trinity is not deemed as lesser than the other, he specifies that the relative opposition of action and passion that occurs within the Trinity is one of origin. This type of opposition occurs, in its perfect form, in the Trinity. Thus, the names given in Scripture reflect this so that the reader might distinguish between the persons.[58]

The Unbegotten and the Generated

In Scripture, the first person of the Trinity is given the name of "Father." In using the theory of relative opposition, Thomas is able to draw specific conclusions about His identity. First of all, the name "Father" provides an analogy that demonstrates the necessity of a Son. The name "Son" would be meaningless if there were not a Father. This demonstrates in a special way that the persons of the godhead are indeed distinct from one another, but they are to be understood as unified. Moreover, it is not that the Father becomes the Father because He begets the Son, but rather the begetting constitutes Him as the Father.[59]

This fatherhood, or paternity, communicates some remarkable specifics about who this person of the godhead must be. As Emery has suggested, there are at least four implications of the paternity of the first person of the Trinity that can be seen in Aquinas' works. Paternity involves a love for the Son. Indeed, an eternal generation must involve love for the Son inasmuch as the Father loves Himself. Paternity must also involve knowledge, which is a mutual comprehension between the two participants of the act of generation. Next, paternity must involve a common action in which the Father acts through the Son. Fourthly, every divine attribute that is attributed to the Father is passed to the Son.[60] In this sense, Aquinas deemed the Father the "principle." To Aquinas, "anything whence something proceeds in any way we call a principle" and therefore since the Father is that from which the Son proceeds, He may be called the "unbegotten" person, or principle.[61] If there were no Father, there would be no Son. Moreover, the Son may be known as the person that possesses all of that which is entailed in paternity. So filiation implies that the Son receives love, knowledge, mutual comprehension, and divine attributes from the Father in generation.

Apart from referring to the Son as the "Son" and the "Word," Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* also insists that the title "Image" is a significant descriptor for

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[58] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles,* 4.24.
[59] Levering, *Metaphysics*, 159.
[60] Emery, *Trinitarian*, 155-156.
[61] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.33.1.

the second person of the Trinity. In the corporeal world, images express similitude in a specific way. Generally, something must be of the same species as another in order to be deemed the image of that other thing. However, not only does image entail a similar species but it also entails origin. This is why the label of "Image" is a personal name signifying the Son's differentiation from the Father.[62]

It is significant to also emphasize that Aquinas affirms that the three persons are co-equal and co-eternal. He admits that if there were any inequality in the divine persons, they could not possess the same essence. For this reason, he argues for the co-eternality of the Son by claiming that the Father does not beget the Son by virtue of His volition. He has not, in the course of time, decided to bring about a procession to produce the Son. Instead, the generation of the Son is a necessity of the nature of the Father. For this same reason, the Son must be equal to the Father in greatness.[63]

The Economy of Generation

The economy of generation should perhaps be understood best as the economic actions of the Trinity that are made possible through the intellectual divine life, which includes the eternal action of generation. As has already been asserted, the purpose of revelation of the Trinity in the first place was primarily soteriological.[64] Aquinas is even clear that it is not possible for one to have faith in the mystery of Christ's incarnation and subsequently, His atoning work, without faith in the Trinity. A belief in the Son of God as the "Son" within the Trinity is indispensable to saving faith.[65] Simply stated, Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* attempts to demonstrate that the second reality of one's salvation stems from the primary reality of the divinity of the Son and the Spirit. In his biblical commentaries, he attempts to establish the primary reality first.[66]

Moreover, in the thirty-third question of the second part of the *Summa Theologica*, he claims that, in a sense, mankind participates in the filiation of the Son. This is to say that through the similitudes of analogy one may come to understand that mankind's own identity as "sons" is directly related to its relation to God the Father. He is the Father of the sons of mankind in that He crafted rational beings in His image. He is the Father of those faithful sons by similitudes of grace and they are given "adopted son" status, as Scripture asserts. He is the Father of sons of faith through similitudes of glory as the faithful share in the glory of Christ both presently and in future hope. So, fatherhood begins with God and His relation to the Son, but is extended to His creation in this way.[67]

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[62] Ibid, 1.35.1.
[63] Ibid, 1.42.6.
[64] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.32.1.
[65] Ibid, 2.2.2.8.
[66] Emery, *Trinitarian*, 13.
[67] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.33.3.

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CONCLUSION

Three generalized criticisms of Aquinas' Trinitarian theology are that he wrongfully separates his discussion of the one God and the triune God, uses language that divorces the triune God from salvation history, and presents a theory that is utterly incomprehensible. This paper has sought to demonstrate that these criticisms are not altogether warranted, at least in regards to his Trinitarian thought concerning generation.

To the first criticism, it is unclear how Aquinas could have integrated the economic and immanent lives of the Trinity in a more effective manner. Certainly, he could have used less technical language but that would have defeated the point of his contemplation, which is itself worshipful and speculative in nature. Moreover, differentiating between the immanent and economic actions of the Trinity proved to be the very breakthrough that allowed Aquinas to propose an analogy for generation that avoided heresy. This seems to justify such tedious distinctions.

To the second criticism, it seems that the length of Aquinas' technical language of the contemplation as well as its specificity explicates, not disguises, the true connection that is made in salvation history. The processions are discussed precisely *because* of their soteriological implications. To the third criticism, there is a very definite sense in which it is true that Aquinas does provide an analogy that is incomprehensible. However, every explanation of generation will be ineffable on some level. Such is the burden of being limited to the use of analogical language. Even in light of these difficult and limiting hurdles, Aquinas' theory possesses very attractive explanatory power of the processional event and manages to avoid what some others have not—heresy.

As Augustine has famously quoted, "There is no subject where error is more dangerous, research more laborious, and discovery more fruitful than the oneness of the Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."[68] Aquinas has taken on the task of this dangerous subject and, by-in-large, presented an exceptional theory of the procession of the Word that in the least provides his readers with the language necessary to further the discussion of the issue. The limitations of speculative theology are considerable, but the goal was to contemplate an understanding of the deep truths of theology proper. The language of Scripture requires that one accept the existence of divine processions. Aquinas therefore proposes an interior procession, a perfect generation, of the Word that succeeds where Arius and Sabellius had failed. Thus, one may distinguish between the persons of the godhead through their relation to one another. This contemplation of the revealed notion of divine procession becomes the very impetus by which one might work out salvation with fear and trembling.

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[68] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1.3.5.

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