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Thomas Aquinas' Metaphysics of 'Relation' and 'Participation' and Contemporary Trinitarian Theology[1]

Najeeb Awad

Abstract

This paper is an attempt at proposing Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics of 'relationship' and 'participation' as a corrector of a contemporary theological trend that conflates 'person' with 'relation' in its understanding of the trinity, turning God, eventually, from a self-existing, particular personal Being into an idealist expression of a network of relational movements reflective of what the human personhood means. Thomas Aquinas' theology of relation and participation invites contemporary theology to retrieve a theology that keeps 'transcendence' characteristic of God's personal being in order not to turn the participation of God in the finite's realm of existence into a pantheist or one-sidedly, human-centered relationality.

Keywords

Aquinas, Relation, participation, Trinity, Metaphysics

I. Introduction

This paper is an attempt at proposing Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics of 'relationship' and 'participation' as a corrector of a contemporary theological trend that conflates 'person' with 'relation' in its understanding of the trinity, turning God, eventually, from a self-existing, particular personal Being into an idealist expression of a network of relational movements reflective of what the human personhood means. I will start with a brief display of the contemporary attempt at emphasizing God's historicity and using the trinity as a model

of relationality pertinent to human existence in history. I will, then, expose in details Thomas Aquinas' understanding of 'relationship' and 'participation' in his trinitarian theology and discuss how this understanding corrects today's reduction of the trinity into the name of a state of social participation in otherness.

II. 'Trinity' as Social Participation in Otherness: Transcending Transcendence

In its attempt at bringing 'God' back to the arena of human thinking about the constitutive significance of the notion of 'relationship' for the understanding of 'self' and 'personhood', contemporary trinitarian theology emphasizes God's relational nature, historical incarnation and progressive re-creation of the world. Among the schools of trinitarian hermeneutics, nevertheless, there stand trends of trinitarian thinking that not only point to God's relational involvement with the world, but also, and more emphatically, God's *inter-dependence* on the world. One can principally say that instead of departing from an interpretation of God's triune nature, these trends choose to depart from a presumption that what necessarily and naturally exists in reality is not 'God', but actually 'God-in-relation-to-the-universe.'[2] Rather than separation or even serious ontological distinction, God and the world are in a fully inter-dependent, organic affinity. This affinity takes perfect shape in a specific form of sociality, wherein the world *and* God provide one another something each does not already possess. God is now considered "essentially the soul of the universe" and "God's relation to [the universe] belongs to the divine essence." so much so that the universe's principals exist naturally and inherently "because they exist in the very nature of God."[3]

The followers of this trend of though admit that if one acknowledges an eternal trinity, one cannot possibly apply such a social form of interdependence to God. Be that as it may, the aforementioned trinitarian trends of thought do not primarily speak about the eternal trinity, preferring instead to stay on the level of the economic trinity and God's existence in history. On the level of the relationship between God and the world, sociality of inter-dependence, as these approaches state, is the best form, and the most coherent image, of the participitorial nature of the relationship between God and the

[2] David Ray Griffin, "A Naturalistic Trinity," in *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*, Joseph A. Bracken, S.J and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (eds.), (New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 23–40, p. 24.

[3] David Griffin, "Panentheism: A Postmodern Revelation," in Philip Clayon and Arthur Peacocke (eds), *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Precense in a Scientific World*, (Grand Rapids, Mich/ Cambridg, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 36–47, pp. 42–43.

human.[4] It shows best than any other form of relationality, thus the argument runs, the real depth of the mutual influence God and the world exert on each other in their relationship. But, most significantly, it invites for transcending God's transcendence once and for all by means of nothing else except the trinity itself.

Underpins the above mentioned method of reinterpreting the trinity on the basis of interdependence sociality is a conviction that metaphysics should be overcome in theology and God's transcendence should be reconsidered. This reconsideration, however, needs not entail denying God's transcendence, but only *transcending* it. There are theologians today who argue strongly that in the interdependence sociality hermeneutics of God-human relationship and no else "the classical idea of transcendence is transcended by allowing God to quit God's traditional transcendence and to empty Godself without remainder into the world, into the spirit of love and the affirmation of the body."[5] God is offered now a generous chance to give up His metaphysical distinction from the human and to descend into the realm of historical existence, giving up irretrievably His eternal status. To say this more bluntly, 'God's emptying Himself *without remainder* into the world' designates an offer for God to maintain existence in the world and to seek survival from extinction. The world is now offering God a redemption chance to recant His old habits of acting in human life from a vantage, absolutist position. The court of history gives God the last chance to get a release-on-bale: He either gives up His lordship, power and 'wholly otherness' and love the world and melt into it completely, or He will remain prisoner in a vicious 'Ezkapan' guarded by the ghosts of the metaphysic's curse. God is called to either love our life's image or die suffocated with His own self.

How can we transcend the boundaries of God's transcendence by means of the trinity? This can be done, as a few theologians today argue, by *historicizing* the reality of God the trinity.[6] The historicization of the trinity entails viewing 'eternity' as "the everlasting fruition of time."[7] Eternity is time at the end of its process of evolution; time in its maturity; time in age's fall. God is now the Spirit that temporalizes the world by placing its progress within history as it should be. God

[4] Lewis Ford, "Contingent Trinitarianism," in *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*, Joseph A. Bracken, S.J and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (eds.), (New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 41–68, pp. 48–49.

[5] John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, "Introduction: Do We Need to Transcend Transcendence?" in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, J.D. Caputo and M.J. Scanlon (eds.), (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 1–16, p. 3.

[6] Michael J. Scanlon, "Trinity and Transcendence," *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, J.D. Caputo and M.J. Scanlon (eds.), (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 77. Scanlon refers here to Joachim of Fiore's belief that the progress of history unfolds no else than the history progress in God's self.

[7] Ibid. p. 76.

becomes the name of a triune unfolding of time, which ultimately eternalizes God by making the trinity the eternal realm of salvation (i.e. self-fulfillment) for humanity. One of the main outcomes of the above mentioned attempt at transcending God's transcendence is a theological conviction that what the triunity of God is all about is first and foremost a dynamic image of relationality that constitutes God not only in His relation with the human, but in His very own being. There is a tendency in today's theology to blur 'person' with 'relation' in the doctrine of the trinity and to define personhood as either 'event' or 'communion'.[8]

But, is every concept of relationality congenial with God's relational nature and His personhood? In order to answering this question, I will go back to the Scholastic theology, where the doctrine of the trinity was rigorously understood in the light of a strong interest in the Aristotelian notion of 'relation'. I will, more specifically, refer to Thomas Aquinas; one of the most prominent classical Western thinkers of 'relation' and 'participation'. I will show that the recent theological over-emphasis on relationality represents in fact an inaccurate echoing of Aquinas' trinitarian theology of 'subsistent relations'. By its indifference to the full scope of Aquinas' understanding of 'participation', some contemporary trends of theology's over-emphasis on relationality originates an inappropriate theology of 'personhood' and of 'relationship' in the doctrine of God as well as in anthropology, which can be corrected by means of Aquinas' trinitarian theology.

II. Aquinas' Notion of 'Relation' and Trinitarian Theology

Medieval philosophy scholars believe that scholasticism pioneered a coherent and fully structured philosophical inquiry on the notion

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[8] R. Jenson, for example, defines the persons of the trinity as 'threefold identity' that expresses God's progressive interaction with the human in time: Jenson, Robert. *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), and Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). John Zizioulas follows a similar track and defines 'persons' in God as 'communion'. He, then, speaks about the Father, Son and Spirit as three unique relational being-ness as communion: Zizioulas, John D. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993; "On Being a Person: Toward an Ontology of Personhood", in *Persons, Divine and Human*, C. Schwöbel and C. Gunton (eds.), Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999, pp. 33–46. Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedicts XVI) defines 'person' as 'total relationality' and considers the person totally and completely constituted by one's relations, possessing nothing of one's own: Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1989), p. 213. He even states that standing *in* relation is not expressive of real personhood (p. 221). For a perceptive analysis and critic of Ratzinger's and Zizioulas' understanding of personhood, see: Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids, Mich/ Cambridge, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 29–126.

of 'relation' in the history of thought, although the idea of 'rela-
tion' itself was first philosophically analyzed so much earlier by
Aristotle.[9] The delay of philosophizing on the notion of 'relation'
till the age of Aristotle may be due to the fact that earlier to this
latter's age there was no single term in Greek language for 'relation',
but rather a phrase that expresses the prepositions 'to' and 'toward'
and designates the state of being 'toward something' (τά πρός τι).
This may, in turn, explain why in the latter centuries the notion of
'relation' was given in Latin language the specific term 'relatio' that
designates 'reference, bearing or toward-ness', and was construed "a
relative that signifies the substantive meaning of something so ordered
or referred."[10] In the scholastic period, and by the help of Aristotle's
philosophy, 'relatio' was studied and thematized as a specific cate-
gorical accident that only exists in the subject in respect to another
subject. There, for the first time, we see a serious inquiry about the
distinction between relations and their causal foundations. We find,
that is, detailed answers to the question: is relation caused by a foun-
dation, or is it just this foundation named in connection to something
else?[11] This is what turned 'relation' into a primal philosophical no-
tion for the first time in the history of thought and generated the
diverse theories of the notion during the scholastic period.[12]

Of relevance to my study is the fact that the origin of the interest
in the concept of 'relation' is not purely Aristotelian or exclusively
philosophical, but also theological in nature. For the theologians of
that period, the driving-force for studying the notion of 'relation' is
the attempt at forming a solid rational interpretation of the doctrine of
the trinity and establishing a lucid understanding of the idea of God's
relation to His creation.[13] On the basis of Aristotle's understanding
of the idea of relation, the theologians of this period view the three
divine persons of the trinity as constituted by a network of relations.[14]

[9] For a brief look at some of the central ideas Aristotle offers on the notion of
'relation', which were borrowed from him by Thomas Aquinas, see the study of Lucian
Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Persons*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2005), pp. 30–35. Turcescu quotes from *Aristotle's 'Categories' and 'Dr Interpretatione'*,
J.L. Ackrill (trans.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), Cat. 6a36-40. He also relies on
the discussion of the same issue in Fabio Morales' "Relational Attributes in Aristotle," in
Phronesis, 39(3), 1994, pp. 55–274, and to a lesser extent on Charles H. Khan's "Questions
and Categories: Aristotle's Doctrine of Categories in the Light of Modern research," in
Questions, Henry Hiz (trans.), (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978), pp. 227–278.

[10] *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Group of editors, 2nd ed. (Washington: The Catholic
University of America Press/ Gale and Thomson Learning, 2003), Vol. 12, 'Relation', pp.
40–44, p. 40.

[11] *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Relation", pp. 41–42.

[12] See, Rodolphe Gasché, *of Minimal Things: Studies on the Notion of Relation*,
(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 1–13.

[13] Gasché, *of Minimal Things*, p. 2.

[14] Mark G. Hanninger, SJ. *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250–1325*, (Oxford: The
Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 1ff.

Be that as it may, the key category for understanding both the trinity and creation in Thomas Aquinas' theology is the category of 'relation'. Like Aristotle, Aquinas views relation as a mode of being distinguished from the substance, yet also characteristic of the external things' connectedness to the substance. According to Hans Meyer, this Aristotelian understanding lays at the background of Aquinas' belief that "relation depends for its being not only on the existence of its subject but also on the existence of something besides this subject."[15] 'Relation', thus, represents for Aquinas (and Aristotle) the least and the weakest form of being-ness because its existence is not by virtue of itself but by virtue of its subject and of the existence of something else besides its subject. This is not to mean, however, that 'relation' is a meaningless, fictitious idea of the mind. 'Relation' is an accident, is a category, because it inheres in the being of its subject. Because it is real, 'relation' is expressive of the substance of a real, existing subject.

It is very important to realize, as Meyer correctly notices, that Aquinas does not deny the existence of relations as *real* accidents, nor does he reduces all realities to mere relations. He, rather, believes that "a real relation presupposes the existence of two real *supposita*, really distinct." In other words, "a subject is required from which the relation proceeds, and another subject really distinct from the first to which the relations extends."[16] 'Relation' is never inherent in another, nor is it in reference to other subjects. The subject of relation, on the other hand, can have more than one form of connectedness with other subjects. It can have these multiple forms of relationality simultaneously without any one of them being referred from another. All relations are rather in reference to a certain substance or subject as their foundation.

The above is theologically reflected in Aquinas' view of the relation between God and creation. God is related to creation by various forms of connectedness. These forms are founded on God because they are modes of relations between members belong who to two different levels of being. Because He is infinite, God is prior to creatures in nature. Therefore, the relation between Him and creatures is founded on God, whose knowability by virtue of this relation is prior in importance to the relation by which God is known to creatures.[17] The same understanding also characterizes Aquinas' proofs of God's existence. He proceeds from proving the existence of a first cause by means of tracing a certain relation of causation and moves into an understanding of God's being and of the trinity. This epistemic

[15] Hans Meyer, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Fredric Eckhoff (trans.), (St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book, Co. 1954), p. 114.
[16] Meyer, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 115.
[17] Meyer, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 118.

movement from the relation between the cause and the effects up
to the first cause is the main form of relationality that provides, in
Aquinas' opinion, knowledge of God's existence in relation to the
world, despite the deficiency this knowledge holds due to the human
limitation and finiteness.[18]

Having said that, when it comes to God's being in Himself – re-
gardless, that is, to God's relation with creation – Aquinas is keen
on departing away from his previous differentiation between the rela-
tion and its subjects and from identifying substance and existence in
God. God for Aquinas is an infinite, simple and necessary being who,
contrary to creatures, does not receive His existence from another.
God is being per se, and His existence is His very own being-ness
that is not in reference to any relation with another.[19] This under-
pins Aquinas' trinitarian thinking in his *Summa Theologica*. There,
he starts his ontology of God by showing that contrary to the human
being, whose being a human and his humanity are not wholly the
same, God's being divine and His divine being are identical. The
distinction between being a human and humanity is an expression
of the fact that the human is composed of matter and form. To the
contrary, since God is not composed of matter and form, "He must be
His own Godhead, His own life, and whatever else is thus predicated
of Him."[20] Because God's being-ness is not caused by an external
agent, and because God is a self-efficient cause of His being (since
He is the first efficient cause), God's being-ness (i.e. that He exists)
and God's essence (i.e. what He is) are one and the same thing.[21]
It is expected, in the light of this stress on the identity of substance
and existence, from Aquinas to proceeds from there to a discus-
sion on God's unity before studying His trinity. For Aquinas, 'one'
means simplicity and indivisibility. Since there is no division between
being-ness and substance, 'being' is convertible with 'one'.[22] And,
because 'one' designates indivisibility, it is opposed to the 'many' as
the divisible is opposed to the indivisible.[23] As 'simple Being', God,
then, is one, and His being one opposes any possible plurality in His
Godhead because God is undivided and not a composite in substance.

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[18] See on this, William W. Young III, "From Describing to Naming God: Correlating
the Five Ways with Aquinas' Doctrine of the Trinity", in *New BlackFriars*, Vol. 85. 999
(2004), pp. 527–541, p. 529. Young shows that because of its deficiency, Aquinas restricts
the knowledge boundaries by means of this effect-cause form of relation to God's existence
in relation to the world, not to God's triune essence.

[19] Meyer, *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 90ff.

[20] Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, Laurance Shapcote (trans.), in *Great Books
of the Western World*, Mortimer J. Adler (ed.), (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.
1990), Vol. 1, Pt. 1, Q. 3, art. 3. All my following quotations of Aquinas are taken from
this version.

[21] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 3, art. 4.

[22] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 11, art. 1.

[23] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 11, art. 2.

"God is God, and He is this God. It is impossible therefore that many gods should exist."[24]

But, what about the trinity? How can the existence of 'Father, Son and Spirit' as the Godhead concur with the previous emphasis on unity and oneness by means of identifying substance and existence? Here, Aquinas resorts to the concept of 'relation' in order to show what the Father, the Son and the Spirit stand for. Aquinas believes that the trinity designates in essence a possibility of procession in God. However, he insists that this procession is not an outward act done by God, as if God is causing something less than Him in nature (i.e. Arius' understanding of the Son's being as different from the Father's), or as if He assumes an imagery figure before creatures (i.e. Sabellius' modalism). Contrary to both extremes, Aquinas states that 'procession' expresses something inherent in God Himself in a manner similar to the intelligible word that proceed from the speaker yet remains in him.[25] This inward relation of procession means that what proceed in God is God as well; is of the same substance. This literally applies to God's generation of His Word, or the Father's begetting of the Son. Because in God the relation's subject is identical with the relation it makes, and because "in God the act of understanding and His being are the same,"[26] the Word that proceeds from God is called the Son, and the generation of the Son and the Son's nature are identical.

This inward procession and its identity with God's being indicate that relations exist *really* in God. These relations' reality lies in that they all proceed from and move toward the same principal substance.[27] Moreover, God's relations *are* His essence. Their being-ness is of the being-ness of the divine essence, for "in God relation and essence do not differ from each other, but are one and the same."[28] But, does Aquinas mean that these relations are totally identical in God? He does not, because Aquinas believes that the notion of 'relation' he relies on presupposes an opposing other toward whom the subject moves to relate. This means that there is a distinction between the two ends of the relation. A similar distinction appears as well in God's relations without this negates God's one and simple nature. This distinction in God is not in His nature but in His modes of relationality.[29]

What would the previous entail with respect to the three divine persons, Father, Son and Spirit? For Aquinas, 'person' signifies an existing single substance with a clear individual being. It does not

[24] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 11, art. 3–4.
[25] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 27, art. 1.
[26] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 27, art. 2.
[27] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 28, art. 1.
[28] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 28, art. 2.
[29] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 28, art. 3.

mean the substance's existence that connotes its nature. It rather means the substance per se in its individual singularity as an existing reality.[30] Aquinas believes that 'person' suitably names God's essence, because despite His difference from creatures in nature, God is the perfect being in whose being we have the real and absolute individual subsistence in a relational nature. God is a 'person' in that He is a self-subsisting, communicable individual. 'Communicability' is central to Aquinas' following interpretation of the three divine *persons* in God. He believes that 'person' in the human designates individuation and particularity of *this* or *that* person. In God, however, the case is different, for 'person' does not signify particularity as an accident in a nature. It rather signifies the nature itself, which is its own relations. In trinitarian words, the Father's personhood is His fatherhood because His fatherhood lies in His relation to or His origination of the Son. The fatherly nature of the Father is not a sign of a particular individuality but of a relation. So, the Father's person is His fatherly relation.[31] It follows from this that the Father per se is a relation of fatherhood since "that which subsists in the divine nature is the divine nature itself."[32] In other words, the Father is a fatherly relation that is subsisted in its own nature. The Father cannot be a personal subsistence of a divine nature because the nature is its own subsistence. And, this nature can not be a nature that has relation, because the relation is not an accident of a substance in God but rather the divine substance itself subsisted.

The above is the inevitable conclusion of saying that "a relation is a *hypostasis* subsisting in the divine nature".[33] This is an important conclusion for Aquinas for it protects his admittance of an existence of an aspect of plurality in God from tritheism. 'Persons as relations' does not threaten the oneness of God's substance, since the various real relations in God are all founded on one, single and simple substance. They are not relations for individual persons, but relations for one, single divine person. As God's attributes (e.g. goodness and wisdom) are not opposed in the one and the same substance, 'Father, Son and Spirit' are not opposed relations because they are relations of one and the same God. Their plurality shows that God's properties are capable of distinguishing themselves from each other. The plurality of relations in God does not signify a plurality of substances because 'person' is the name of relations, not of individuals. It does not connote a material but rather a formal divine plurality.[34] The word 'trinity', therefore, designates plurality of relations that are God.

[30]   Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 29, art. 1.
[31]   Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 29, art. 3–4.
[32]   Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 29, art. 4.
[33]   Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 29, art. 4.
[34]   Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 29, art. 4; Q. 30, art. 3.

The previous exposition of Aquinas' trinitarian logic shows that Aquinas partially identifies substance and accidents, existence and essence in his interpretation of 'person' in the doctrine of God. Some scholars believe that Aquinas deliberately implements this Aristotelian metaphysical trend in his speech on the trinity, rather than in his understanding of 'person' and 'relation' in general, for considerable apologetic reasons.[35] This is why Aquinas finds it necessary to argue, against tritheism, that God's relations do not exist in God's substance. They are identical with the divine substance, and the divine relations are subsistent relations. This is why Aquinas trinitarian theology implies that:

> The divine nature existing in the relation of fatherhood is God the Father; the divine nature existing in the relation of sonship is God the Son; and the divine nature existing in the relation of spiration...is God the Spirit.[36]

Such an apologetic language may invite contemporary theologians to believe that in Aquinas we have a pioneering example of a total identification of 'person' and 'relation' and a reduction of the particular personhood of God's trinity to the relations this trinity makes. A careful reading of Aquinas' trinitarian logic within the wider context of his thought supports, however, William Young recent claim that in his *Summa Theologica* Aquinas reminds us that he is basically trying to explain the *'notions of persons'* in God rather than developing *'personal notions'*.[37] These notions are constitutive of the knowledge of the persons, without which we are unable to know God because of our human finite reason. It is true that Aquinas does not, for instance, say that God's persons do not separately exist in God's substance but they are God in essence for they are three subsisted persons who are truly one essence in their relations. However, one can explain why Aquinas does not do this. He believes that it is basic to maintain the ontological difference between the human and God in being. The best way to do this is to show that, other than the human, 'relation' and 'person' in God are identical. This, in other words, means that the purpose of Aquinas' argument here is *epistemological* and not ontological in concern. His argument, as Timothy Smith says, in questions 2–26. of his *Summa Theologica* invests into a discourse

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[35] Thus believes, Robert L. Richards, S.J. *The Problem of an Apologetical Perspective in the Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, in *Analecta Gregoriana*, Vol. 131, Sec. B. N. 43, (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1963), pp. 110–112. According to Richards, the apologetic purpose appears in that "Aquinas has relied on the metaphysics of relation to give systematic structure to the plurality of persons subsisting in the unity of the divine essence" (p. 111).

[36] *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Relations, Trinitarian", Vol. 12, pp. 45–46, p. 46.

[37] Young, "From Describing to Naming God: Correlating the Five Ways with Aquinas' Doctrine of the Trinity", p. 539, and Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 40, art. 1.

on the persons of the trinity that aims at showing the foundational necessity of the three divine persons for understanding the human degrees of knowing God (if not of knowing in principle) in this life and the life after.[38]

Aquinas is not actually making the notion of 'relation' the foundation of the reality of God. He is not trying to fit God's being into a criterial, preconceived notion of 'relation'. He is not subjecting the reality of God to a notion satisfactory to the human reason. Aquinas is rather sorting out a logical confusion in the human mind about God's 'oneness-in-trinity' or 'trinity-in-unity' by the help of a notion that is supposed to be perceivable for the human. In order, therefore, to perceive and redeem the real dimensions of Aquinas' ontology of 'relation' and 'person', we need to look at Aquinas' understanding of the notion of 'participation'. By studying this third key notion, I will uncover that by emphasizing the relational aspect in God's nature Aquinas is not imposing on the doctrine of God a concept of 'relation' that denies the subjects on the ends of the relationship, and is not, therefore, making God an expression of a movement of relations in which the human substantially participates. In other words, Aquinas' ontology of participation is a challenging criticism to contemporary trends of theology of participation in God.

III. A Trinitarian Metaphysic of the Notion of 'Participation'

As I stated earlier, Aquinas derives his notion of 'relation' from Aristotle. Aristotle distinguishes 'relatives' from 'relations' as such and speaks about relatives that have their relatedness by virtue of themselves and those that have their relations by virtue of relatedness to the other. In either case, 'relation' is a category or a predicate *of* a relative and not a relative per se. By this, as B. Mattingly says, Aristotle confines all the commentators who confuse 'relation' with 'relative'.[39]

P.C. Phan believes that Aquinas applies this distinction of 'relation' and 'relative' to his understanding of the relationship of the Father and the Son in the trinity. Aquinas believes that this trinitarian relationship consists of: 1) at least two exiting terms related to each other, 2) an existing ground for the relationship; in the Father and the Son's case, it is begetting, and 3) an exiting relationship as such.

[38] Timothy L. Smith, *Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Theological Method*, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), pp. 48–60.

[39] *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 12, "Relation", p. 43. Mattingly refers to Aquinas' *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, and *De Potentia*, Q. 7–8, to show that the last derives from this Aristotelian distinction his conviction that the study of relatives is prior to that of their relations: the 'what' I prior to the 'how'.

For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, the first characteristic of relation is that it does not exist in and by itself, for it is not a substance but an accident. "It does not subsist in itself but exist in another."[40] The second characteristic of 'relation' in Aristotle is that it is an accident that, as Gasché says, "amounts to the property, inhering in a thing, of being-toward-another."[41] His belief that relation as *prose ti* should not only be perceived from its subject but also with respect to another thing has created the scholastic thinkers', especially Aquinas', inquiry "is being-toward-another possible without a movement away from and ahead of the subject of the relation?"[42]

This metaphysical inquiry, one has to say, is not only essential because it points to the basicality of the 'openness-toward-another' characteristic of every relation. It is primarily essential because it acknowledges an existence of a subject for the relation. This importance is forcefully stressed when it is paralleled with another question: "what is the status of the subject from which the relation seems to originate, if relation is essentially a being-toward-other, and how does the nature of such an outgoing subject in turn affect the nature of relation?"[43] By emphasizing that "there is no relation...without a prior opining of the possibility of being-toward-another, by which the subject is allowed to arrive 'in' the place of the other,"[44] it becomes clear that the idea of relation is meaningless without the relation's *subject* and without holding the relation toward *another*. It is meaningless to speak about a relation without discerning its two ends, for no relation would ever happen without originating from a subject and destining toward *another*. This is so even if the constitutive power of the relation with regard to its subject's being is actual to the extent that "the identity of the subject of a relation comes to the subject only from the *relatum* and, hence, is always in waiting."[45] Even if we supposed that the relation is as such constitutive of its subject's identity, relation per se is neither the identity of this subject as such, nor is it its own subject.

It is within the framework of this understanding of relation as the orientation of a subject toward another that Aquinas understands the notion of 'participation'. Aquinas uses the notion of 'participation' in his ontology of God's being. Yet, Aquinas departs ontologically from an acknowledgment of the necessity of the doctrine of the

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[40] *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 12, "Relations, Trinitarian", p. 45.
[41] Gasché, *On Minimal Things*, p. 2.
[42] Gasché, *On Minimal Things*, p. 7. A similar inquiry may also underlies the shift in modernity from the attention to 'what is a relation' to an attention to its knowability, which is associated with an emphasis on the knowledge of relation by means of participation *in* and *as part* of it.
[43] Gasché, *On Minimal Things*, p. 8.
[44] Gasché, *On Minimal Things*, p. 9.
[45] Gasché, *On Minimal Things*, p. 10.

real distinction (not separation) between essence and existence, so that in his investment of the notion of participation he maintains the difference between contingent or finite and non-contingent and infinite realities. This difference for Aquinas is a basic constituent of the Christian belief that the world originated from an infinite Creator. Aquinas concludes from this that "being related to God is a reality in creatures, but being related to creatures is not a reality in God."[46] One should again say here that the distinction between nature/essence and existence/actualization does not mean for Aquinas that essence can be without existence. It just means that the essence can sometimes be perceived without having a specific subsisting in the created universe.

Aquinas' acknowledgment of the distinction between the 'essence' of the thing and the 'being' through which this thing 'is' is noticeably combined with an understanding of 'participation' as 'taking part of something'. He invests herein the Aristotelian conviction that what belongs to something by participation can be predicated of it substantially.[47] This is how he understands the equal divinity of the Father, Son and Spirit. Because the Son and the Spirit participate with the Father in the divine substance by virtue of proceeding from the Father, divinity is predicative of their own nature. Having said that, Aquinas differs radically from Boethius, who speaks about single form of participation, in that Aquinas distinguishes between various forms of participation according to each one's subjects. One of these forms of participation is that of the effect that participates in what is attributed of its cause. This form applies, for instance, to the human's participation in God's goodness, according to Aquinas. Here, 'good' is an additional predicate, in which the human participates by virtue of being caused by God as God's creature. This form of participation is different, however, from the form of participation of the Son in the Father's essence in the trinity. The Son's divinity is not an additional predicate opposed to the Son's substantiality. It is a substantial predicate of His nature, which lies in the Son's and the Father's equal constitution of one divine essence along with the Spirit. There is, then, an ontological distinction in the concept of 'participation' with regard to God-human relation and with regard to Father-Son-Spirit relations.

Within the framework of 'cause-effect' relationship, Aquinas uses the notion of 'participation' to speak about the existence of created beings as *derived* from the being of God. According to Julius

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[46] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 50, art. 2., as quoted by Peter Hick, One or Two? A Historical Survey of an Aspect of Personhood", p. 41. Hick correctly realizes that Aquinas' focus on man's relation with God is not identical in conception with the contemporary stress on the constitutive significance of relationship for human identity.

[47] See: Rudi A. Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas*, (Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1995), pp. 11–13.

Weinberg, this derivation does not mean for Aquinas that the being of creatures is a 'particle of the being of God'. As a spiritual reality, essence in God is distinguished from the action that reflects God's subsistence. 'Participation' here means that creatures can *imitate* the way by which God exists.[48] The possibility of tracing similarity and perceiving a possible imitation of creatures of God's existence is based on the logic of causality, which as such implies a distinction between the cause/causer, the causing process and what is caused. In this imitation, there is a clear concern about emphasizing the degree of similarity that renders the creatures' participation in God's existence demonstrative of His substance. However, there is no denial here, as Norbert Metga notices, of the imperfectness and inadequacy of the caused effects, which prevent their full identification with the cause.[49] This is also why despite his appreciation of theological language and his rejection of limiting it to negation (emphasizing instead that the human language does reflect a true knowledge of God), Aquinas stresses the language of causality when he speaks about participation with regard to God (*via causalitatis*) in order to maintain a clear distinction between God and our understanding of, and language about, Him.[50]

Theological language for Aquinas has a positive and not a negative value because it is a meaningful expression of God's truth. Therefore, theological language does not only have a 'metaphorical meaning' limited to the assimilation of the activities of the human and God. It also has a 'proper' meaning that assimilates the beings of God and creatures.[51] However, the proper meaning of language does not reduce God to an idea in our mind or to an expression of a human state of existence. This proper meaning reflects God's being by means of analogy. Our language of God, as Battists Mondin says, could be appropriate for describing God and creatures. Nevertheless, "it is quite clear that it never has the same meaning for creatures and for

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[48] Julius R. Weinberg, *A Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 184–185. Weinberg refers to Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II.50–54.

[49] Norbert W. Metga, *Analogy and Theological Language in the Summa Contra Gentiles: A Textual Survey of the Concept of Analogy and its Theological Application by St. Thomas Aquinas*, (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang GmbH, 1984), p. 62. Metga calls this understanding of participation in terms of imitation or likeness 'analogy of proportionality' and sets double sense of 'proportion' in Aquinas' thought (pp. 64–66). For another analysis of Aquinas' notions of proportion and proportionality see: Laurence Paul Hemming, "Analogia non Entis Sed Entitatis: The Ontological Consequences of the Doctrine of Analogy", in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Vol. 6.2, 2004, pp. 118–129.

[50] See: Battista Mondin, S.X. *St Thomas Aquinas' Philosophy: In the Commentary of the Sentences*, (The Hage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), pp. 87–102.

[51] Mondin, *St Thomas Aquinas' Philosophy*, pp. 95–99.

God, since no perfection belongs to God and His creatures in the same way."[52]

It is in the light of this qualification of language and in the context of his qualified notion of participation that we have to read Aquinas' conviction that analogy is the most appropriate method for conceiving theological language.[53] In his use of analogy, Aquinas is mainly interested in the relation between the *analogates*. Analogy in essence is a linguistic relation that is not its own end. It is a relation that essentially pertains to analogates, to distinguished sides. This relational essence of analogy means that understanding Aquinas' view of analogy is possible restrictively in relation to his notion of 'relation', especially when he speak about the relation between God and the human. As this relation implies besides unity a diversity that lies in the difference between God and creatures that cannot be narrowed down, 'analogical relations', which imply participation, also include besides the dimension of unity an aspect of diversity. This diversity appears through the fact that the relational analogy is grounded in an existence of distinct analogates, who differently appertain of similar properties because their particularities as subjects are real.[54]

This essential understanding of analogical language and of analogy as such on the basis of acknowledging analogates – rather than on the basis of denying the agents at the two opposite ends of the relation – clearly shows an avoidance of reducing the subjects in the analogical language about the relation between God and the human to mere forms of speech that originates from the human's mind while this latter takes part in a relational form or movement of conversation with the former. It strongly criticizes the trinitarian understanding that states that "the closest analogy between the triune God and human existence created in the image of this God is not in persons [i.e. not in analogates] but in the personal relationships themselves."[55]

[52] Mondin, *St Thomas Aquinas' Philosophy*, p. 100.

[53] Mondin, *St Thomas Aquinas' Philosophy*, pp. 103–119. Miroslav Volf recently sides with the analogically shaped relation between God's being and Man in relation to the link between the doctrine of the trinity and ecclesiology, arguing that "'person' and 'communion' in ecclesiology cannot be identical with 'person' and 'communion' in the doctrine of the trinity; they can only be understood as *analogous* to them": Volf, *After our Likeness*, p. 199. Volf correctly states that the absence of this analogical mediation of the relation between God and His community would either deifies the church or denies God His divine being.

[54] Mondin, *St Thomas Aquinas' Philosophy*, p. 111. 'Therefore, it seems proper to conclude that for St. Thomas the essential constitutive of analogy in general are two: 1) it is a principle of unification, 2) this unifying principle is a perfection (quality, property, etc.) that is realized in several beings (or is predicated of several subjects according to different degrees)".

[55] Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), p. 49. For a good argument that Aquinas is not following this reductionist approach, see Karen Kilby, "Aquinas, the Trinity and the Limits

This Thomist, principal belief is specifically pertinent to the trends of theology that tends to turn God's relational identity and personhood into an image expressive of human relationality and personhood. If God's triune relational nature is beyond our comprehension, we cannot, then, turn the triune nature into a notional foundation for human relationality; a foundation, that is, that is epistemologically measurable, rationally captureable and conceptually fixed. We cannot do this because this nature is beyond our rational boundaries, and because by default 'criterion' is supposed to be something bounded, determined and measurable in order to work as an assessment means. We can make the language of the doctrine of the trinity a criterion for measuring the accuracy of human, secular conception of 'relation' and 'personhood' in general. Yet, this does not make us naturally part and parcel of the triune life and being of God just because we image in our human life what the language of the doctrine on relationship and personhood states. The over-concern about grasping the trinitarian nature of God may be the reason behind the over-enthusiasm about turning God's trinitarian relational being to an image of our own relational, communal human nature. In the face of this enthusiasm, Thomas Aquinas offers a relational understanding of the triune God that does not turn Him into a criterial model for us to apply in our life, but rather reminds us that "there are at least some aspects of what we must say about the trinity of which we can have no grasp whatsoever."[56] By remembering this, we avoid reducing God's being into mere notional modifier of human reality.

Aquinas' belief that God's 'is' or 'God is' is not self-evident for the human, but rather demonstrable from some indicators of the existence of God,[57] shows that Aquinas does not understand by 'participation' that the human is constitutive particle of God's being, as well as it reveals that Aquinas does not totally identify essence with existence, although he concedes that for us the primary access to the essence is existence. Had he meant by participation that we are parts of, or we are in, God's being, since by knowing God's existence we identify with God's essence, he would have not claimed that 'God is' is not self-evident for us. God's 'is' would have definitely been considered self-evident for us had participation in God been possible because, since such a participation is founded on the allegation that God per se is an event or movement. Because Aquinas does not view God as an event, his five proofs of God's existence proceed from discerning divine actions into perceiving the divine subject that originated them:

of Understanding," in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 7(4), 2005, pp. 414–427.

[56] Kilby, "Aquinas, the Trinity and the Limits of Understanding," p. 427.

[57] Julius R. Weinberg, *A Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 187–188.

from motion to a prime mover, from causation to a prime cause, from possibility to necessary being, from degrees of perfection to a most perfect Being.[58] Participation should not be invested in turning God to an event open to the experiences and subjected to the needs of creatures. Participation is an expression of an analogical imitation of God's actions by His creatures.[59]

This qualified, proper theological understanding of participation is obscurely twisted when participation becomes the key notion for reducing the three divine persons in God into mere threefold move-ment of relations. If God's trinity is merely relations, and if the human's person-like language is an expression of the human partic-ipation in the triune movement that is God in essence, participation, then, implies that the human is a phase in God. This is an inevitable conclusion in the light of the fact that the human language is after all the creation of the human himself, and in the light of the alle-gation that participation connotes 'being-part-of-something' and not 'being-in-the-likeness-of-someone'. On the basis of this alleged un-derstanding of participation, existing in a relation is already inherent to the participant per se. It is not caused by another subject that is self-subsisting. This twisted view of participation is correctly played down by a theology of participation like Aquinas', where God is the self-subsisting origin of the general existence in which humans participate.

This balanced understanding of participation does not only shape Aquinas' view of God-human relation. It also underlies his under-standing of the triune relations between Father, Son and Spirit in the Godhead. For Aquinas, the relation as inherent in the substance should in the case of God's being be identical in nature with the essence of its subject. Otherwise, the subject acquires by its relations to others things that are not already inherent to it. Aquinas states that in God's essence, nevertheless, as Mark Hanninger shows, the relationships do not change anything in the divine essence, unless the potential of change is already inherent in the essence per se.[60] To take this to the trinity, we say that the fatherly relation of the Father to His Son is not the cause of the Father's fatherly nature, nor does it add a fatherly accident to the first divine person by virtue of His movement toward another divine person called Son. The fatherly relation only reflects the substantial fatherly nature of the Father that

[58]   Weinberg, *A Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, p. 188.

[59]   Weinberg, *A Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, p. 198. "in order that God be imitated as completely as possible in His creation, there must be some creatures that act as much like God as is possible for something which is not absolutely perfect".

[60]   Hanninger, *Relations*, p. 21. According to Hanninger, this is the meaning of Aquinas' saying that "something changes only if there is a change *in* it" in his *Commentary on the Sentences* (Scriptura Super Libros Sententiarum), I.d. 26, Q. 2, art. 1. ad. 3; d. 30, Q. 1, art. 1.

is already there, and it only turns this fatherly potential of loving a Son by begetting Him eternally into actuality by means of relating the Father to this Son. It does not create a fatherhood that is not *in* the Father already. God is Father, Son and Spirit in a movement toward each others, and not a movement of fatherhood, sonship and spiration. And, the triune movement in God does not originate the divine essence by virtue of its happening. It does not do this because this movement does not change or add anything to God's essence. It rather reflects or reveals this essence in its substantial being-ness.

The triune relations can not create the divine being because they are already in it and their nature is identical with the nature of their origin.[61] In God's trinity, there are fully mutual relationships between the Father, the Son and the Spirit because they relate to each other on the basis of the same essence. Thomas Aquinas stresses participation by means of the mutuality of the personal relations of the Father, the Son and the Spirit for one and only reason. He wants to show that by means of this mutuality the three persons relate to each other on the basis of their common essence, which in turn makes them together co-constitutive of the nature they share and they are.[62]

IV. Relating to the Other as 'An-Other'

Thomas Aquinas' theology of relation and participation teaches contemporary theology that sharing a contemporary intellectual occupation with the notions of 'relation' and 'participation' should not be executed without maintaining the criterial place of the theology of God in understanding these notions. Aquinas adopts the notions of 'relation' and 'participation' from Aristotle and shares tangibly with the intellectual bearers of his era. Yet, his understanding of these notions is grounded in the doctrine of God: God's relational nature is the foundation of our understanding of participation and relation. Emphasizing God's otherness and trinitarian personhood should point to the necessity of structuring hermeneutics for the notion of 'relation' that is more conceptually convenient for theological ontology than the one dominant today.

We need to retrieve a theology that keeps 'transcendence' characteristic of God's personal being in order not to turn the participation of God in the finite's realm of existence into a panentheistic or one-sidedly, human-centered relationality. Even God can not execute such panentheistic participation because every knowledge God has of the finite is always embedded in His infinite divine mind.

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[61] Hanninger, *Relations*, p. 23.
[62] Hanninger, *Relations*, p. 34, and Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 28, art. 1.

Otherwise, God's interaction with the human makes Him lose some of His attributes;[63] makes Him; that is, lose His personhood. Thomas Aquinas' trinitarian understanding of relationship is a useful and reliable source for achieving this purpose in theological reasoning today.

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[63] See Gordon Knight, "The Theological Significance of Subjectivity", in *The Heythrop Journal*, 46(1), 2005, pp. 1–10, p. 4.