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Jana Marguerite Bennett, *Aquinas on the Web? Doing Theology in an Internet Age*
(London: T&T Clark International, 2012) 200pp. Paperback £21.99. ISBN:
9780567304742.

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/aquinas-on-the-web-9780567304742/>

Reviewer: Nathaniel Warne, Durham University

Why does the internet matter for doing theology? This is the question that Jana Marguerite Bennett's book *Aquinas on the Web? Doing Theology in an Internet Age* is attempting to answer. The specific focus of this book is what Bennett calls Web 2.0 sites, where people are encouraged to interact and have discussions. This could include sites like Facebook and Twitter as well as blogs and discussion boards. Chapter Two attempts to get to the heart of some criticisms posed about Internet theology as idolatry in its focus on images rather than words. Bennett then moves on to think through the implications of online life on conceptions of embodiment and personhood and whether the Internet builds community or destroys it. By addressing the rise of the "social cyborg," Bennett discusses to what extent technology changes our ideas of what it means to be human. Chapter Four brings out the relationship between "authorities" online and the Internet as a democratic space open to a variety of ideas and discussions. In Chapters Five and Six the book moves to topics related to ethics investigating the relationship between communities and right behavior as well as evangelism. The central question of Chapter Five is "Can the church exist online?", while Chapter Six draws upon a controversy surrounding a discussion that took place online concerning emergent church theologian Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*. Bennett here looks at how people treat each other in Web 2.0 settings.

Where this book really shines is its attempts to answer some very fascinating and important questions about the Internet and theological discourse. In Thomist terms, this book is an example of someone who has habituated the sorts of rational dispositions that allow one to think about Christian life and practice. Bennett is privy to the problems that online technologies create for the developing of the Christian life, and she gives informed solutions that draw upon the tradition and presents these solutions in an accessible and systematic way. Bennett effortlessly draws upon thinkers like John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, Stanley Hauerwas and a number of online contemporary resources with ease in achieving her goal of bringing insights to specifically Web 2.0 issues. One example of this is Bennett's examination into a gift giving culture related to the giving of amenities like advice without cost, thus combating consumerism. She also interestingly highlights the difference in online and offline practices. One example of this is the practice of excommunication, excluding those who do not conduct themselves in appropriate ways.

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Bennett notes that that excommunication of this kind is more widely accepted within online communities, seeing this practice as an aspect of accountability.

The above accords with Bennett's stated reason for calling this book *Aquinas on the Web?*, which is to draw upon Aquinas' theological rhetoric and dialectical construction as an approach that brings to the surface the strengths of opposing views while overcoming criticisms that are partial, one-sided or incoherent. This said, a drawback of the book is that there is not really any substantive engagement with Aquinas himself. In fact, Aquinas' presence is no more frequent than the other theologians mentioned above, leading this reviewer to ask why the title of the book bears his name. Bennett explicitly admits that "this book is not about Aquinas" (p. 3).

In the opinion of this reviewer, this leads to two pitfalls. The first is that the stated method does not give adequate attention to the form of 'Thomism' being drawn upon. There are a variety of Thomisms – for example, compare the distinct readings of Thomas by Henri DeLubac and Reinhold Hütter – that would shape the method by which Bennett addresses these questions. If Bennett is coming from a certain school of Thomas scholarship she does not reveal her particular leanings.

The second pitfall is that the overall absence of Aquinas himself throughout the book leads to a number of missed opportunities where specifically Thomist solutions could have been applied to the problems presented in the book. For example, a discussion of concurrence could have been helpful in Bennett's investigation of God being "in the web", a discussion of the virtues could have strengthened analysis of online communities and character development, and a more robust discussion of charity and friendship could have expanded the chapter on ethics.

In conclusion, this book shines in its clear summary of some of the theological issues related to Web 2.0 and in providing interesting solutions for how Christians can proceed to do theology on the web. However, the title of the book seems to be a misnomer. *Aquinas on the Web?* is very strong on looking at Web 2.0 issues from a theological perspective, but not so strong in the use of Aquinas himself as a resource.