Alfonso Briceño O.F.M. (1587–1668) on John Duns Scotus's Metaphysical Groundworks of Theology: The Controversies on Infinity*

Roberto Hofmeister Pich

Introduction

There cannot be any doubts about the place of the Franciscan master Alfonso Briceño (1587–1668) as one of the greatest names of Latin American colonial scholasticism. Briceño was born in Santiago de Chile, but he best be characterized as belonging to what could be considered the second generation of Scotist scholars in Peru—i.e., the generation after Jerónimo Valera (1568–1625).1 Those scholars were all, more specifically, related to Lima, having acted and/or studied at the Convent of San Francisco de Lima, where Briceño himself received his philosophical and theological education and later worked as “Professor Primarius” and also as “Professor Iubilatus” of Sacred Theology.2 On European soil, Alfonso Briceño gave lectures in Madrid and Rome, publishing, between 1639 and 1642, his remarkable and highly speculative Controversiae in the Spanish city.

The Controversiae are instrumental to form a clear picture of the reception of Scotus’s (and Scotist) thought and the atmosphere of intellectual debates within the Franciscan Order and other academic institutions in those parts of

---


the “New World”. Particularly Alfonso Briceño’s knowledge about John Duns Scotus was taken to be so thorough that one of the censors of his books put down in writing how he used to be called by his contemporaries: “Scotulus”, due to his congenial “sharpness of intelligence” (ingenii acumen) and intellectual “strength” or “vivacity” (acritas). Fortunately, we nowadays have studies that help locate Alfonso Briceño’s volumes in Latin American catalogues and libraries. On the other hand, these extensive volumes remain sorely uninvestigated, although nearly all central issues of John Duns Scotus’s theology and philosophy are discussed in them with a detailed consideration to the current debates on his doctrines.

What kind of literature did Briceño produce? He published 12 “Controversies” dealing with major subjects of John Duns Scotus’s commentaries on the First Book of Peter of Lombard’s Sentences, i.e., Scotus’s Ordinatio I, although he actually shows profound knowledge, takes into consideration, and makes an extensive use of Scotus’s entire opera. The Controversiae were transmitted in two volumes, published in Madrid in the period from 1639 to 1642. It is important to realize that both volumes comprise only the Pars Prima of the controversies initially intended by Briceño. There are certain reasons to assume that the Chilean Master planned a Pars Secunda—in a third volume—that would treat the will and the power of God, as well as divine predestination and the Trinity, hence completing a comprehensive set of debates on all central topics of Scotus’s thought in Ordinatio I. However, either the volume manuscript completely disappeared or it was actually never written. In spite of some spec-

3 Cf. Alfonso Briceño, Prima Pars Celebriorum Controversiarum in Primum Sententiarum Ioannis Scoti Doctoris Subtilis, Madrid 1639 (1642), Vols. 1–11. From now on, Alfonso Briceño, Controversiae ..., I (Volume I of the Pars Prima) or II (Volume II of the Pars Prima).


5 Claus A. Andersen, “Intuitive and Abstractive Cognition, “praecisiones obiectivae”, and the Formal Distinction in Mastri and Belluto and Later Scotists Authors”, in: Archivum Francisceanum Historicum 108:1–2 (2015), pp. 235–236 (pp. 183–247), footnote 127, suggests that “[i]t rather seems, however, that there were two editions of the work, one which was printed in 1638–1639 by the Typographia Regia in Madrid and another which was printed by Antonio Beller (Antonius Bellerus) in the same city in 1642. Except for the name of the printer and the year of publication, this latter edition [...] seems to be altogether identical with the first one”.