Christopher Cleveland

Christopher Cleveland makes explicit how John Owen appropriated both Thomas Aquinas and the Thomistic tradition in three theological loci: divine simplicity, infused habits of grace, and the hypostatic union. This revised dissertation completed under John Webster addresses the Catholicity of seventeenth-century Reformed Orthodoxy, specifically building on expositions of Owen by Sebastian Rehnman and Carl Trueman. Cleveland offers a largely historical study of Owen and Aquinas but hints at a prescriptive result when he judges Owen “an appropriate starting point for theological reflection for any theological program that seeks to build upon a Western, catholic foundation” (156).

The introductory chapter argues that Owen consciously adopted a Thomistic metaphysic but was not beholden to the Thomistic system. Other studies have shown Thomistic influence on earlier Reformers like Zanchi and Vermigli, but Cleveland believes that exploring this influence in a later seventeenth-century voice helps one avoid a simplistic explanation of Reformed orthodoxy as dependent on late-medieval nominalism.

Chapter 2 shows from references in his early controversial writings that Owen appropriates a Thomistic doctrine of divine simplicity. Owen’s argument closely parallels the work of Diego Alvarez (1610) and the Dominican wing of the de auxiliiis controversy. Owen interprets simplicity to entail premotionism in the doctrine of providence. If God is pure act, then no creaturely act occurs apart from God’s act to move it or activate its potential. Owen’s early Display of Arminianism serves as the main source for this chapter and indicates the primary uses to which Owen puts divine simplicity. Cleveland concludes that Owen came to this position based on the “exegetical foundation and grounding for it” (68). This is rather bold based on the evidence he presents and raises questions for contemporary Reformed theologians who might not interpret the divine name in Ex. 3:14 univocally as “Being.”

Chapter 3 begins a discussion of infused habits of grace in converting change. Aquinas broadened the Aristotelian notion of habit to include the infused theological habits given by God. Owen takes up “infused habits” as a primary weapon against suspected semi-Pelagian errors. If one acknowledges that the theological virtues are morally impossible for fallen humans, one must posit an infused habit of grace. Such a habit is an “act of creation” (80) by God leading to a supernatural end otherwise impossible for humans.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of habitual grace, but here in relation to the growth of the theological virtues rather than to their initiation. Owen
follows Thomas in affirming that saving grace is distinct from moral virtue because it is the arrival of a theological virtue—one that has its ultimate end in God's glory. But both authors also depict saving grace as a habit that may be exercised like a moral virtue in the process of sanctification. Although the theological virtues arise from God's direct action and so are not acquired by repeated actions, they act like other moral virtues in their continuance. Cleveland then shows how Owen differed from Aquinas on the value of habitual grace for justification. He concludes that the Protestant distinction between one's external status before God and the changed internal state of the believer holds “biblical paradigms together and in proper tension.” (120) No doubt this was Owen's goal and likely Aquinas's goal, too. The chapter, however, would be helped by further explanation regarding why Owen is more “biblical.”

Cleveland discusses Christology in Chapter 5. He shows that Owen is heavily dependent on particular sections of the Summa for his exposition of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. This chapter succeeds in showing the dependence. The hypostatic union is a union in one person. It is anhypostatic in that the human nature of Christ does not have personal existence until united to the Son of God. Cleveland suggests as a distinctive characteristic that Owen is less concerned for contemporary discussions and more interested in “following some basic lines of thought presented in Scripture” (151).

In his Conclusion, Cleveland positions Owen as a continuation of the broadly western catholic tradition. This may be seen primarily in his Trinitarian theology and in his strong affirmation of the creature/creator distinction, which Owen believes entails exhaustive providence and premotionism.

Among its strengths, this study makes its point seem obvious on further reflection. That Owen is indebted to the language of infused habits is transparent in Discourse on the Holy Spirit, but Cleveland shows just how close Owen is to particular passages in Thomas and his interpreters. Cleveland also shows that Thomistic vocabulary is pervasive throughout Owen’s career, beginning with the Display of Arminianism (1642) through the Discourse (1679). That Owen vehemently attacked “scholastic” theology in his Theologoumena (1661) makes his dependence on Thomas that much more interesting, if somewhat inconsistent.

Cleveland has an interest in Scripture as the foundation for Owen’s theology. Yet he does not delve into how Owen moves from Scripture to Thomistic concepts. Cleveland shows the links to Aquinas with precision, but the links with Scripture are less clear and make several chapter conclusions appear extraneous.

This is a specialist text. The lengthy quotations from Owen and Aquinas are valuable as a reference but occasionally interrupt the argument. On the