

The Aquinas industry

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

A striking aspect of contemporary Protestant theology is the amount of interest shown in the great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, who was long regarded as the champion of rationalism and the “natural” knowledge of God—a theology at odds with a Protestant understanding of the limits of reason. But in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) **Eugene Rogers** looks at Barth’s and Aquinas’s treatments of the key biblical text on the natural knowledge of God—Romans 1—and shows that there are surprising affinities between the two theologians. Barth used Anselm’s vision of theological inquiry as “faith seeking understanding” to criticize the rationalist, Enlightenment approach to theology. Rogers shows that he could have just as easily used Aquinas to the same end.

Stanley Hauerwas echoed Rogers’s point with the bold claim in his Gifford lectures (published as *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* [Brazos, 2001]) that Barth is the church’s greatest natural theologian—a close kin to Aquinas rather than his nemesis. This claim would come as a surprise to Hauerwas’s other exemplars of natural theology—Pope John Paul II and the Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder. Yet all four would agree that theology deals with “the way things are” and not merely with individual psychological states or competition for power in the civic sphere.

A series of extraordinarily learned articles about Aquinas’s views on truth, revelation and scripture, often in comparison to Luther’s or Barth’s, have been penned by the Lutheran (now Roman Catholic) theologian **Bruce Marshall**, author of *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). Marshall explores Aquinas in light of Anglo-American analytic philosophy with its emphasis on asking how we can know something is true and its effort to describe truth as correspondence between a statement and reality. How can we know whether a statement and reality correspond when the topic is God, to whom we have no obvious empirical access? Marshall builds his answer on Aquinas’s views of the incarnation.

The Radical Orthodoxy movement gives a central place to Thomas's vision of truth as grounded in participation in God—a vision of truth that contrasts sharply with that of modern nihilism and modern analytic philosophy. In *Truth in Aquinas* (Routledge, 2001) two leading figures in Radical Orthodoxy, **John Milbank** and **Catherine Pickstock**, take aim at Marshall's reading of Aquinas, which for them posits an unnecessary distinction between theology and philosophy. For Aquinas, as they explain him, all things that exist participate in God and all knowledge is a gift dependent on a divine Giver, so any effort to describe the correspondence between a human statement and a divine reality refuses to see that nature is always already graced and that participation in the divine Being undergirds all being and knowledge.

While most Protestants working with Aquinas focus on questions of truth or revelation, **John Bowlin** explores contingency or fortune and its place in the pursuit of virtue (*Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas' Ethics* [Cambridge University Press, 1999]). The contingencies of the world—what secular people call “luck” and ancient philosophers called “fortune”—are part of what makes it difficult for people to pursue virtue. How do we describe the virtuous life—the habitual choosing of the good that becomes almost second nature—when much of our lives seem to be marked by happenstance?

Recent theologians have revised the view that Aquinas offered an abstract, philosophical account of God based on Aristotle and only secondarily turned to discussion of the triune God who is known through Christian scripture and tradition. Archbishop of Canterbury **Rowan Williams** is one of those who have pointed out that this is a mistaken understanding of Aquinas. In “What Does Love Know? St. Thomas on the Trinity” (*New Blackfriars*, 2001), Williams paraphrases Aquinas this way: “God is consciously joyful, and the object of his joy is first himself and secondarily himself as creator and preserver of the universe.” God as “pure act” is no philosophical abstraction, but rather God's loving knowledge of Godself, poured out in creation and redemption. God's “knowledge” is nothing other than the Son, and God's “love” is the Spirit. Hence for Aquinas, Williams says, there can be no portrait of God other than the subsistent relations between Father, Son and Spirit.