

Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Trinità e Incarnazione: Il rapporto tra filosofia e teologia rivelata nel pensiero di Leibniz*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero, Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1999. Pp. xi + 419.

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Christian theology is one of the most neglected areas of Leibniz's thought. It is a subject that engaged his attention throughout his intellectual career. He seems to have been very well informed about the main currents of theological opinion in his own time, and to have had an extensive knowledge of historic doctrinal positions. He left behind a wealth of letters and unpublished papers discussing topics in revealed theology; but this resource for understanding both his own thought and the history of theology at the dawn of the Enlightenment remains largely unmined. The Academy edition of Leibniz's works includes as yet no systematic project for the publication of his theological papers—the largest class of his papers—although important treatments of theological subjects (perhaps the most important, though how can we be sure?) are finding their way into series I (the general correspondence) and VI (the philosophical writings). Gaston Grua surveyed and assembled a large quantity of theological texts, but these are organized around Grua's interest in Leibniz's theodicy,¹ so that Leibniz's views on topics such as grace, predestination, and theological method are represented much more richly than other topics in revealed theology. Another topic much discussed in the secondary literature is Leibniz's treatment of eucharistic theology, which has attracted attention because it is involved both in his negotiations about reunion of the churches and in some of his major discussions of issues about corporeal substance. But other central topics of Christian theology have received much less attention in the secondary literature; and this is true in particular of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, even though they are rich in metaphysical resonance and Leibniz had quite a lot to say about them.

Maria Rosa Antognazza's book on Leibniz's treatment of the Trinity and the Incarnation goes a long way toward rectifying this neglect. It is an elegant work of philosophical scholarship, giving an impressively comprehensive account of his discussions of these topics from the beginning to the end of his career, organized in four major episodes: Leibniz's more youthful writings (1663-71), his most systematic treatments of Trinity and Incarnation (1672-92),² his observations on English debates about the Trinity (1693-1705), and his last years (1706-16). In each case we get not only a full account of the most important texts, with ample quotations from them, but a rich apparatus of references to other texts, and

a very helpful account of the background, including the views and writings of authors discussed by Leibniz. The *Theodicy* (1710) is treated less extensively than other main texts—wisely, in my opinion, as it is much more familiar than the others. The sources, both primary and secondary, are generally quoted in their original languages.

Throughout his career, as Antognazza shows, Leibniz defended the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation in rather traditional formulations. ‘Defended’ is to be understood here in a carefully limited sense. Leibniz did not think the truth of these doctrines could be rationally demonstrated. As “mysteries,” in his view, they are “above” reason but not “contrary” to reason. Leibniz’s philosophical efforts regarding the mysteries, accordingly, are devoted to rebutting objections purporting to show that they are contrary to reason, and principally to rebutting charges of self-contradiction.

Antognazza follows the development of Leibniz’s methodological views about the relation of reason to the mysteries, as well as his treatment of the doctrines themselves. At least in his final view, she thinks, the terms of the mysteries so exceed our comprehension that the demonstration a priori, not only of their truth, but even of their consistency is beyond the powers of our reason. On Leibnizian principles, however, a demonstration of their consistency is not needed, for the consistency of a doctrine can be *presumed* until an inconsistency is proven. What Antognazza calls Leibniz’s “strategy of defense” relies on such presumption and seeks to show that objections fail to prove any inconsistency in the doctrines (pp. 7-8).

She argues further that he seeks to render the consistency of the doctrines more plausible by finding in the created world relationships that must be possible because they are actual and that are analogous (though of course not perfectly so) to the relations among the persons of the Trinity or to the relation between the divine and human natures in Christ (pp. 8-16). Leibniz’s use of the traditional analogy between the union of divine and human natures in Christ and the union of soul and body in a human being is moderately familiar to students of Leibniz’s treatment of mind/body relations and of corporeal substance. That he also takes up the traditional idea of *vestigia Trinitatis* (traces of the Trinity), finding creaturely analogies to the intratrinitarian relations, is a less familiar fact, but one amply evidenced in Antognazza’s book.

Some of these analogies concern points of importance in Leibniz’s metaphysics, and Antognazza argues on that basis that “Leibnizian views on the trinitarian nature of God and the metaphysical structure of the universe are not ... uncon-

nected, but actually coexist comfortably, or even intimately connected, in Leibniz's thought, perhaps even to the extent of reinforcing each other reciprocally" (p. 11). I think Antognazza may overestimate the depth of Leibniz's commitment to orthodox views of the Trinity and Incarnation. I don't doubt his sincerity in saying that traditional conceptions of these matters can be cleared of charges of inconsistency and should be maintained; but there is an important strand of his thought about revealed theology that is not only juridical but profoundly pragmatist, and that may reasonably color our view of the way in which he holds such doctrinal beliefs.

It must be granted, however, that Antognazza cites impressive evidence of points of importance for his thought which Leibniz presents in terminology of clear trinitarian resonance. The most central of these points, perhaps, is the harmony of the world, which Leibniz in 1702 and 1710 characterizes in terms of a *perichoresis* of "everything" or of "things" (p. 14). The primary use of the term *perichoresis* in Western thought has been to express the intimacy of the union of the persons of the Trinity. What is meant in the Leibnizian context, by analogy, is the complete representation of every substance in the universe in each other substance, which is a main feature of the preestablished harmony. Another trinitarian analogy is found in section 48 of the *Monadology*:

There is in God *Power* that is the source of all, then *Knowledge* that contains the detail of ideas, and finally *Will* that makes changes or productions according to the principle of the best. And that is what corresponds to what in created Monads constitutes the Subject or Basis, the Perceptive Faculty, and the Appetitive Faculty.

As Antognazza justly remarks, "the association of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with power, knowledge, and will or love is a commonplace so well established in theology as to represent— precisely here, in the heart of Leibnizian metaphysics—a clear allusion to the Trinity" (p. 373).

The influence is reciprocal, as Antognazza says, and also runs in the other direction—from Leibniz's metaphysics to his theology. The material Antognazza presents makes clear (though she may be less emphatic about it) that there are ways in which Leibniz seems to allow his metaphysics to shape his account of the Trinity. Although he wished quite explicitly to remain within a very traditional framework for these doctrines, and never claims originality for what he says about them, he has a conception of the Trinity that is notably rigorous in its nominalism or conceptualism.

The one triune God is God taken absolutely (*Deus absolute sumtus*, in a phrase

that Antognazza likes to quote), while each person of the Trinity is God taken relatively (*Deus relative sumtus*); there can be only one of the former though there are three of the latter, because ‘God’ is understood differently in these different contexts (cf. VE 2418-19). With one unstable point, to which I will return, the picture is summed up in Leibniz’s statement that

a person in general is a substance, single [*unica*] in number and unsharable [*incommunicabilis*], which in God essentially involves relation and with its correlates constitutes [*constituit*] an absolute substance single in number (VE 2419).³

The essentiality of relation in such a case is amplified in another document in which Leibniz says that although a “person of the divinity” is “an uncreated singular substance subsisting *per se*,” it “involves an essential relation in such a way that its existing alone implies [a contradiction]” (VE 433). No person of the Trinity, that is, could exist without the others (a thoroughly orthodox claim).

Taking up a traditional comparison, Leibniz analogizes the essential relation between the Father and the Son in the Trinity to the relation between the mind as understanding and as understood when a (human) mind understands itself. A twoness seems to be introduced here because there is in the mind something that has a power of perceiving [*vis percipiendi*] and something that has a power of manifesting [*vis exhibendi*] and thus of being perceived (pp. 182-83). But what is thus exemplified “in a created Mind in some way,” Leibniz adds, “occurs in God in the most perfect way [*perfectissima ratione*]” (pp. 187-88/VE 661)—the point, I take it, being that the multiplicity of persons in the Trinity is somehow more robust than that of knower and known in human self-knowledge.

The unstable point in Leibniz’s formulation to which I referred above is the (traditionally accepted) characterization of the persons of the Trinity as “substances.” Antognazza points out that in some of his later writings he avoids or renounces this characterization, apparently in order to avoid any appearance of tritheism. But he seems to see this as a merely verbal caution. He continues to view the persons of the Trinity as “subsisting”⁴ (p. 353)—as subjects, things (*res*).

The nominalist or conceptualist character of Leibniz’s conception of the Trinity is connected with this point about subsistence. The modalist heresy consists in classifying the persons of the Trinity, not as three divine subjects but as properties or modes of being or acting of a single divine subject. The opposing (and surely graver) heresy of tritheism can have as a form the error of those who “conceive the persons of the Most Holy Trinity as individuals of the same species and the common Essence as a universal” (VE 662). Both of these points, as just stated,

are part of what can be called the tradition of Latin orthodoxy coming down to Leibniz. That did not keep such exponents of that tradition as St. Thomas Aquinas from identifying the one triune God with the divine essence and the three divine persons with relations,⁵ but the metaphysics of Aquinas and Leibniz are quite different in relevant ways. Leibniz assumes, of course that the divine essence is one, and the same in all three persons, and he does not explicitly reject the identification of the one triune God with the divine essence; but, so far as I have noticed, he avoids implying such an identification, and his way of thinking seems quite different. He does explicitly deny that the persons of the Trinity are relations. Rather they are constituted by or through (*per*) relations (pp. 186-87, 262, 352), their distinctiveness being constituted by the ways in which they are related to each other.⁶

The motive most plausibly ascribed to Leibniz here, I believe, though he does not make it explicit in this context, is his nominalism or conceptualism about essences and relations (cf. p. 351). Both essences and relations belong for him to the class of merely intentional objects that depend for their being on being thought of. In his view nothing can have the robust subsistence that orthodoxy demands for both the one Godhead and the three divine persons without being a subject in a very fundamental metaphysical sense. That demands a conception of three divine subjects in one unique divine subject—in medieval terms, three *supposita* in one *suppositum*, whereas in the dominant Scholastic conception, the three divine persons were the only *supposita* of the one divine essence, which was not viewed as a *suppositum*.⁷ Leibniz's way of thinking is evident when he says that the three persons "constitute" the one absolute divine substance, and that it contains (*complectitur*) them (VE 2418- 19).⁸ In effect, he views the one triune God as a concrete, complex system, of which the three persons are constituents—not that he would call them "parts," for none of them can exist alone, and in that respect they are of a different metaphysical character from the one God that includes them.⁹ This is, I think, a more modern and less traditional conception of the Trinity than Leibniz's rhetoric suggests—how like him to adopt Scholastic theses with an unadvertised shift in meaning!

There remain questions, much too large to be explored here, about the viability of the idea of one absolute substance constituted by a plurality of relative substances or relative subsisting subjects. Theologically, it does not obviously fall into any of the historic heresies, but can it provide an adequate account of the *unity* of the divine Trinity? Philosophically, there is the question whether a plurality of substances can constitute a single substance; Leibniz's treatment of the

doctrine of the Trinity is obviously relevant to much debated interpretive issues about his answer (or answers) to that question.

In *Trinitá e Incarnazione* Maria Rosa Antognazza has presented us with the material for engaging Leibniz with these questions, and has herself drawn important and illuminating connections with his metaphysics. Her book deserves the attention of any scholar interested in theological aspects of Leibniz's thought.

Notes

¹ Grua's collection of *Textes inédits* by Leibniz (Gr); and Gaston Grua, *Jurisprudence universelle et théodicée selon Leibniz* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953). Grua may have thought Leibniz's treatment of the Trinity and Incarnation unoriginal to the point of banality; see Gr 69, n. 199. I will argue that they may have more individuality than was meant to appear in them.

² Particularly important here (and helpfully discussed at length by Antognazza) are two brief papers, "De Deo Trino" and "De Persona Christi," written by Leibniz on opposite sides of a single piece of paper and first fully published in VE 658-63 (Nos. 147 and 148), although excerpts had been printed in Gr 179-80. Antognazza generally follows Grua and VE in dating them tentatively to 1683-86, although she notes that an apparent reference in "De Deo Trino" could be taken (very plausibly, so far as I can judge) as showing that it could not have been written before 1693 (pp. 187-88, note 40), which would make her second and third episodes overlap in time.

³ This is from the *Examination of the Christian Religion*, which I believe was written in the mid-1680's. This passage, and the one I quote next, are quoted by Antognazza (p. 179nn).

⁴ Though perhaps not *per se*, as Antognazza notes (p. 353), since none of them can exist without the others.

⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 2; q. 30, a.1-2.

⁶ They may also be assimilated to foundations (*fundamenta*) of relations—features of things in which their relations are grounded. See Antognazza, p. 181.

⁷ At least one medieval theologian, the fourteenth century Franciscan John Bassolis, did discuss the view (which he attributed to unnamed "ancient" writers) that in the Trinity there is a single absolute *suppositum* common to three relative *supposita*. Bassolis rejected this view for largely philosophical reasons. On Bassolis, see Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Metaphysics of the Trinity in Some Fourteenth Century Franciscans," section 4.2— forthcoming in Timothy Noone, ed., *Medi-*

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eval Philosophy: The Franciscan Tradition (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2001).

⁸ *Completitur* occurs in a passage Leibniz replaced, but the constitution idea is as clearly present in the final version; indeed, it is more qualified in the first draft, inasmuch as Leibniz there says, “constitute, so to speak” (*ut ita dicam constituunt*).

⁹ This difference in metaphysical character, stressed in the *Examination of the Christian Religion* (VE 2418-19), might also form the basis of Leibniz’s reply to any charge that an absolute divine subject, together with the three relative divine subjects, would form a Quaternity rather than a Trinity in God—a conclusion condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. In his view the absolute and relative subjects are different enough in character not to be *four* in the relevant sense.

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