Final Reflections

John Behr and Khaled Anatolios

John Behr:

As a concluding comment, I should like to return to the point raised by Ayres, that it is not enough simply to tell a better version of the fourth-century history in the expectation that modern theologians will finally get it straight! This is a valid point: if we want to have Christianity's fourth-century heritage taken seriously, we need to be in dialogue with modern writers. But, if there is to be a dialogue, both sides must be allowed to speak, and so we are also responsible for expounding the historical material on its own terms. As Heidegger put it, "[O]nly when we think through what has been thought will we be of any use for what must still be thought."[1] Perhaps studying the figures from a distant era will open up for us possibilities we would never have dreamed of within our own modern presuppositions, so that we can recognize differences even beyond those which lie within our own horizon or tradition. If I am right in affirming that there is a different style of doing theology prior to Augustine[2] and after him in the East than that which we find in the theological and scholarly tradition in which Ayres's book stands, then we must ask whether we need to address the question of the legitimacy of each (and ponder how one might even answer that) or whether a plurality of approaches is possible without reducing one to the other. In a way, this would be a further step toward deconstructing monolithic notions of "Orthodoxy" in recognition of genuine and legitimate diversity within early Christianity and among modern Christians. Might it be better not to speak of Nicaea and its legacy, but of the legacies of Nicaea—or better—"Christ and him crucified" (2 Cor 2:2) and the ways in which Nicaea and its interpreters affirm the true divinity of this one?

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (trans. Joan Stambaugh; New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 41.

[2] With the various qualifications regarding him mentioned earlier.

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Khaled Anatolios:

In responding to my criticisms, Ayres places me "at the right" and characterizes our difference as my rejection or suspicion of his "historicizing approach" which interprets "key figures within the tradition by exploring their immediate engagements."[1] I must protest that I have no problems whatsoever with a "historicizing approach" so defined. In light of Ayres's assessment of where we differ, let me articulate very simply and transparently the essential point of difference as I see it. In a word, I find an inconsistency between Ayres's theoretical claims and his actual narration of fourth-century theology. That is to say, his advocacy of a pro-Nicene culture theoretically privileges holistic accounts of Christian life and distinct practices of scriptural exegesis as bearing the intelligibility of different trinitarian positions, yet his narration focuses too narrowly on terminology and the particular question of inter-trinitarian relations. A final example of this tension illustrates the point: Ayres concludes his chapter on Gregory of Nyssa, which is predominantly concerned with *Ad Ablabium*, with the admonition that we need to reprioritize our assessment of Gregory's texts: "Rather than turning first to the *Ad Ablabium*, I suggest we make far more use of three texts: *Catechetical Orations, Refutation of Eunomius's Confession*, and *Contra Eunomium* 2."[2] I agree with the principle here espoused but am puzzled by its lack of implementation in the very chapter which it concludes; that is emblematic of my agreement and disagreement with Ayres's work. As this example indicates, my concerns are not simply reducible to the question of the demotion or promotion of Athanasius in retellings of fourth-century debates, though we do have different opinions regarding this issue. What I miss is the lack of a discussion of the incarnation as much in Gregory of Nazianzus as in Athanasius, and I lament the lack of exposition of the exegetical moorings of trinitarian doctrine as much in the treatment of the bishop of Hippo as in that of the Alexandrian. It is true enough that one book cannot contain everything, but this is precisely why questions of prioritization and perspective become key methodological principles. So my fundamental discomfort has to do precisely with the prioritizing of what I have called the mathematics of tri-unity over the presentation of a holistic vision of Christian life in which a particular reading of Scripture is appropriated and performed. My own contention is that it is the latter presentation, however incompletely achieved, that should have logical priority since it is this presentation that contains the intelligibility of a given trinitarian doctrine and gives rise to it.

That said, it would not accurately reflect my appreciation of Ayres's achievement to end on a note of dissatisfaction. I, like other students of the fourth century, am much indebted to Ayres for his invaluable work in this book. While I would respectfully decline to place myself precisely at his right (perhaps my caution against

[1] Ayres, *Nicaea*, 15.

[2] Ibid., 360.

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a blanket denunciation of the whole enterprise of modern systematic theology will have me transferred to the left!), I am happy to reiterate my fundamental sympathies with some of his guiding principles and to express my gratitude for his prodigious and fruitful labors.

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