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# Thomism in John Owen

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CHRISTOPHER CLEVELAND

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*Dedicated to my family*

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CHRISTOPHER CLEVELAND

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2013 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Cleveland, Christopher.

Thomism in John Owen.

1. Owen, John, 1616-1683. 2. Thomas, Aquinas, Saint, 1225?-1274. 3. Thomism. 4. Reformed Church--Doctrines--History--17th century.

I. Title

230.5'9'092--dc23

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Cleveland, Christopher.

Thomism in John Owen / by Christopher Cleveland.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 978-1-4094-5579-0 (hardback) 1. Owen, John, 1616-1683. 2. Thomas, Aquinas, Saint, 1225?-1274--Influence. I. Title.

BX5207.O88C54 2013

230'.59092--dc23

ISBN 9781409455790 (hbk)

ISBN 9781315551005 (ebk)

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# Acknowledgments

In the pursuit of this study, there are many people who have aided me and given me great assistance along the way. I must first recognize those who advised me in the research of this study. First of all, I must thank Dr Nicholas Thompson, who helped me begin this project and who gave me great advice concerning methodology, approach and the task of academic research. Second, I must thank Dr Francesca Murphy, who helped me to understand the mind of the Angelic Doctor. Dr Murphy provided a helpful and unique Catholic voice in my research. I must thank Drs Thompson and Murphy for suggesting that I examine the *congregatio de auxiliis* in particular. I would also like to thank Dr Suzanne McDonald for reading an early draft of my second chapter, and for providing helpful feedback. Finally, I would like to thank Dr John Webster, first of all for agreeing to supervise my project, and also for the extraordinary supervision that he gave this study. He has on numerous occasions helped me to shape a mass of details into solid, coherent arguments, and helped me to produce a work of which I am quite proud. It has been an honor and a privilege to work with one of the leading theologians of the English-speaking world.

My greatest thanks go to my family. Thanks go to my brothers Kendall and Shane, who encouraged me and supported me in our year together in the United Kingdom. My greatest thanks go to my parents, Harold and Theresa Cleveland, for the love and support that they have always given me, and for encouragement in the pursuit of this research. It was only with their encouraging guidance that I could have completed this work.

Christopher Cleveland



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Willem Van Asselt and Eef Dekker (eds), *Reformation and Scholasticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). Used by permission of Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group. © Copyright 2001 Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing.

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# Abbreviations

<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>	CTJ
<i>Church History</i>	CH
Richard A. Muller, <i>Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725</i> . 2nd ed. 4 vols (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003)	PRRD
<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>	SCJ
<i>Summa Theologiae</i>	ST
<i>Summa Contra Gentiles</i>	SCG
<i>Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum</i>	In Sent.
<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>	WTJ

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The Puritan theologian John Owen (1616–1683) has, until recently, been a neglected and ignored figure in the study of seventeenth-century theology. Carl Trueman sees this fact arising chiefly from the way in which Owen and other puritans had been cut off from the ecclesial, educational and intellectual establishment of England after the Great Ejection of 1662.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the reasons for this neglect, recent years have seen a rise in intellectual interest in Owen. This interest in Owen is partially due to the increasing recognition that he was a very prominent figure in his own day. Owen was vice-chancellor of Oxford under Oliver Cromwell from 1651 to 1657, and was thus prominent in the leadership of one of the major intellectual centers of the Western world.<sup>2</sup> Owen was a very influential figure in the Protectorate, serving as chaplain to Cromwell and preaching numerous times to parliament.<sup>3</sup> Most notably, Owen preached the sermon to parliament the day after the execution of Charles I.<sup>4</sup> While Owen was highly regarded by virtue of his office and political connections, he was primarily respected by virtue of the strength and depth of his thought. Trueman notes, “Owen was without doubt the most significant theological intellect in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, and one of the two or three most impressive Protestant theologians in Europe at the time.”<sup>5</sup> Owen was one of the leading Christian thinkers of his era, and his work had a profound impact in its day. Owen’s theological writings exhibit a profound learning and a familiarity with essential systematic definitions and categories, as well as a concern for the use and value that such teachings have upon the life of the Christian believer. There is a depth and a profundity in his writings that perpetuate a value for Christian theology that supersedes their seventeenth-century context.

The depth of Owen’s work comes from the fact that he was well-versed in a variety of traditions and streams of thought. Trueman writes, “By the standards of his age he was profoundly learned, at ease with both the wider theological tradition of Western catholic thought (in the broadest sense), the trajectories of classical philosophy as mediated through the medieval schools and the Renaissance, and

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<sup>1</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> John Owen *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 8 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999) contains nine sermons that Owen preached before Parliament.

<sup>4</sup> John Owen, “Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection,” in *Works* 8, 127–62.

<sup>5</sup> Carl R. Trueman *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

contemporary theological literature, Protestant, Catholic, and heretical.”<sup>6</sup> Owen was by all accounts a learned and well-read man. Sebastian Rehnman, seeking to catalog Owen’s influences, writes:

In order to locate Owen intellectually we need to consider some of the contemporary currents of thought that are reflected in his writings. The late mediaeval and Renaissance background makes a valuable contribution to our understanding, and the most influential contemporary currents of thought are Augustinianism, Aristotelianism, scholasticism, and humanism.<sup>7</sup>

Owen was influenced by numerous streams of thought prominent in the Renaissance and medieval periods, none of which were monolithic.<sup>8</sup>

Thus there were a wide variety of influences upon Owen, each of which was multifold and diverse. Rehnman concludes of Owen’s education, “[I]t is clear that the academic formation and the sources used by Owen establish him in the Christian tradition and the contemporary intellectual currents.”<sup>9</sup> Owen was rooted strongly in the Western catholic tradition, and trained in a diverse range of contemporary and ancient movements of thought. This brings a depth and a unique relevance to his writing that surpasses most other works of the era. Owen’s work, while rooted in a particular seventeenth-century context, retains theological relevance due to its strong connection to ancient and medieval thought.

There is one particular influence that plays a prominent role in Owen’s thought. Thomas Aquinas and the school of thought that bears his name, Thomism, were a great influence upon Owen. Rehnman writes, “The most important of the mediaeval scholastics for Owen seems to be Thomas Aquinas.”<sup>10</sup> Trueman writes, “[Owen] drew deeply upon the mediaeval metaphysical tradition, with a particular liking for the thought of Thomas Aquinas.”<sup>11</sup> Trueman concludes, “The conclusion to which a close reading of Owen and his use of Thomas and Thomist sources would seem to lead is that his thought is, on one level, not to be legitimately described as Scotism but as a modified and eclectic Thomism.”<sup>12</sup> Thomistic elements possess a significant role in Owen’s theology, both as it is derived directly from Thomas, and as it is derived from those who were his followers. It is the purpose of this work to examine the role of Thomism in the theology of John Owen. It is the purpose of this chapter to outline the areas of Thomistic influence upon Owen that will be

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 26–44.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>11</sup> Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 24.

discussed here, and to examine the secondary literature that is relevant to the study of Thomism in John Owen.

## Spectrum of Influence

In order to properly assess the influence and impact that Thomism had upon John Owen, it is necessary to define the term “influence.” There is a spectrum of ways in which Thomistic influence appears in John Owen, ranging from direct quotation of Thomas to mere similarity on a certain point. There are generally four categories into which Thomistic influence falls.

First, there is direct quotation of Thomas or a Thomist author. Here there is a very clear and pointed use of Thomas or a Thomist, with a quotation or a paraphrase. Owen sometimes misquotes Thomas or references him incorrectly. This is found often in the body of a text, as Owen is developing his argument, but sometimes it is found in the preface to a work where Owen is explaining the history of a certain topic, such as *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance*.<sup>13</sup>

Second, there is the use of a Thomistic theological concept, with identical or similar terminology to Thomas or Thomist authors. In this case, Owen will develop a formulation of a subject that is nearly identical to that of Thomas on the same subject. One example of this is found in the *Christologia*, where Owen formulates an understanding of the Son’s assumption of a human nature and the hypostatic union that is nearly identical in several places to that developed by Thomas in the *Summa Theologiae*.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes Owen will reference Thomas in these cases (as in *Christologia*) and other times he will not (as in *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*).<sup>15</sup> This is the most common type of Thomistic influence that is found in Owen.

Third, there is the use of similar but not identical principles. Here, Owen may have formulated a concept that is very similar to that formulated by Thomas, but the concerns and actual formulations are distinct. At other times, Owen may seem to be following a similar logic to a point that Thomas makes, but his conclusions and concerns are distinct from Thomas. There is an overlap between these two, and the concepts are similar, but not necessarily identical due to the different concerns that Owen and Thomas possess.

Fourth, there are times at which Owen and Thomas merely coincide in their thoughts. This is usually because they are borrowing from a common source, which is very often a Western authority, such as St Augustine, or a creedal formulation. This is somewhat rare.

Overall, there are a variety of ways in which Owen demonstrates Thomistic influence. The influence of Thomism in John Owen can generally be placed into one of these four categories of influence. Thomism did have a strong impact

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<sup>13</sup> John Owen, *Works* 11 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> John Owen, *Works* 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> John Owen, *Works* 3 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000).



upon Owen, and this is usually seen by Owen's use of Thomistic categories in his systematic examination of a certain topic.

### Areas of Thomistic Influence

There are three major areas of Thomistic influence upon Owen's theology. The first is the concept of God as pure act of being. Owen uses the Thomistic understanding of God as pure act in a wide variety of ways, relating it to soteriology and theology proper. The second is the concept of infused habits of grace. Owen's use of the concept of infused habits is primarily related to the soteriological issues of regeneration and sanctification. The third is the Thomistic understanding of the hypostatic union. Here, Owen is closest to Thomas, using Thomistic themes in almost the exact same way that Thomas himself uses them.

First, Owen affirms the Thomistic understanding of God as pure act of being, without any potentiality. In his first published work *A Display of Arminianism*, Owen writes, "The essence of God, then, being a most absolute, pure, simple act or substance, his will consequently can be but simply one; whereof we ought to make neither division nor distinction."<sup>16</sup> Owen here presents the Thomistic doctrine of divine simplicity in order to demonstrate that the will of God is God Himself. If the will of God is God Himself, then it cannot be resisted or frustrated. Owen gives the exegetical basis for this in his later work *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, in which he responds to the Socinian John Biddle's catechism.

Those who affirm God to be a simple act do only deny him to be compounded of divers principles, and assert him to be always actually in being, existence, and intent operation. God says of himself that his name is Ehejeh, and he is I AM, --that is, a simple being, existing in and of itself.<sup>17</sup>

Owen's use of this Thomistic doctrine differs in each work in which it is found. In *A Display of Arminianism*, Owen is arguing for the irresistible nature of God's will. What God wills infallibly comes to pass. In *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, Owen is arguing for the immensity of God, and for the lack of limitations upon Him, over against John Biddle, who argues for a strictly limited and corporeal God. In each of these, Owen makes a unique use of the Thomistic understanding of God as pure act in order to either confirm the Christian faith or to oppose enemies of the faith.

Second, Owen makes use of the Thomistic concept of infused habits of grace. Owen uses the Thomistic concept of the infused habit of grace to explain regeneration and sanctification from a Reformed perspective. Owen writes in his work *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*,

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<sup>16</sup> John Owen, *Works* 10, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 44.

<sup>17</sup> John Owen, *Works* 12, 70–71.

The work itself wrought is our *regeneration*. I have proved before that this consists in a new, spiritual, supernatural, vital principle or habit of grace, infused into the soul, the mind, will, and affections, by the power of the Holy Spirit, disposing and enabling them in whom it is unto spiritual, supernatural, vital acts of faith and obedience.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding sanctification, Owen writes, “in the sanctification of believers, the Holy Ghost doth work in them, in their whole souls, their minds, wills, and affections, a gracious, supernatural habit, principle, and disposition of living unto God; wherein the substance or essence, the life and being, of holiness doth consist.”<sup>19</sup> This habit, Owen explains, comes not by repeated action, but by the direct implantation of God Himself.

Habits acquired by a multitude of acts, whether in things moral or artificial, are not a new nature, nor can be so called, but a readiness for acting from use and custom. But this nature is from God, its parent; it is that in us which is born of God. And it is common unto or the same in all believers, as to its kind and being, though not as to degrees and exercise. It is that which we cannot learn, which cannot be taught us but by God only, as he teaches other creatures in whom he planteth a natural instinct.<sup>20</sup>

And yet, when it comes to justification, Owen finds this understanding of habits to be less than helpful, and even reprimands Aquinas for it. In his *Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, Owen writes,

It is therefore, to no purpose to handle the mysteries of the gospel as if Hilcot and Bricot, Thomas and Gabriel, with all the Sententiarists, Summists, and Quodlibetarians of the old Roman peripatetical school, were to be raked out of their graves to be our guides. Especially will they be of no use unto us in this doctrine of justification. For whereas they pertinaciously adhered unto the philosophy of Aristotle, who knew nothing of any righteousness but what is a habit inherent in ourselves, and the acts of it, they wrested the whole doctrine of justification unto a compliance therewithal.<sup>21</sup>

Owen makes his disagreement with them clear when discussing the Protestant understanding of justification and habits.

That there is an habitual, infused habit of grace, which is the formal cause of our personal, inherent righteousness, they [the Protestants] grant: but they all

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<sup>18</sup> John Owen, *Works* 3, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 329.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 468–9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.

<sup>21</sup> John Owen, *Works* 5 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 12.

deny that God pardons our sins, and justifies our persons, with respect unto this righteousness, as the formal cause thereof; nay, they deny that in the justification of a sinner there either is, or can be, any inherent formal cause of it. And what they mean by a formal cause in our justification, is only that which gives the denomination unto the subject, as the imputation of the righteousness of Christ doth to a person that he is justified.<sup>22</sup>

Owen's use of the infused habit of grace, while definitely Reformed and Protestant, nevertheless moves in a Thomistic direction against semi-Pelagian foes by laying the emphasis upon the power of God in infusing a habit of grace into the soul.

Third, Owen makes strong use of Thomistic concepts related to the hypostatic union of Christ. In Owen's work *Christologia*, he writes,

I shall herein wholly avoid the curious inquiries, bold conjectures, and unwarrantable determinations of the schoolmen and some others. For many of them, designing to explicate this mystery, by exceeding the bounds of Scripture light and sacred sobriety, have obscured it ... Hence Aquinas affirms, that three of the ways of declaring the hypostatical union which are proposed by the Master of the Sentences, are so far from probable opinions, as that they are downright heresies.<sup>23</sup>

Owen explicitly references Aquinas here from *Summa Theologiae* IIIa. 2, 6. This certainly indicates that he has read Aquinas's treatment of the incarnation in the *Summa Theologiae*. It is clear as Owen develops his thought that he is quite dependent upon Aquinas for his treatment of the incarnation. In his work *Christologia*, Owen examines Christ's assumption of a human nature, and the hypostatic union that is the result of that assumption. In each of these, Owen demonstrates his indebtedness to Aquinas's treatment of the subject. For example, in the discussion of the hypostatic union, Owen clearly opposes the idea that Christ's human nature is merely an "accident" of His divine nature. He writes,

There is an artificial union wherewith some have illustrated this mystery; as that of fire and iron in the same sword ... Something of this nature may be allowed to be spoken in way of allusion; but it is a weak and imperfect representation of this mystery, on many accounts. For the heat in iron is rather an accident than a substance, is separable from it, and in sundry other things diverts the mind from due apprehensions of this mystery.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, *Works* 1, 224.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 230.