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The Sentences

By Peter Lombard

Book 1: *The Mystery of the Trinity*, book 2: *On Creation*, book 3: *On the Incarnation of the Word*, translated by Giulio Silano, *Mediaeval Sources in Translation* 42, 43, 45, Toronto, 2007, 2008, 2008; 278 pp., 236pp., 189pp., pb. € 40.00, € 30.00, € 30.00, ISBN: 978-0-88844-292-5/293-2/295-6.

From this first complete English translation of the most famous systematic-theological textbook in the history of Western thought, three (out of four) books have been published: on God (the Trinity), on creation and sin, and on incarnation and redemption. In this way, the next generation, hardly versed in Latin, will still have access to a longstanding theological heritage. This may apply for students as well as teachers. For a long time it seemed that Herman Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (1895-1911) was one of the last buildings erected on the ground-plan laid by Peter Lombard in the 1150s. Yet a century after Bavinck one of the leading evangelical theologians in the USA, Norman Geisler, largely follows the same plan in his four volumes *Systematic Theology* (2002-05), this time even by resuming the medieval *questio*-form: each subject discussed by answering specific questions. Of course there are differences. For instance, whereas Lombard simply begins, after a brief introduction, with the doctrine of God, Bavinck and Geisler, following protestant scholastics, start with the doctrine of Scripture. But the process of adjusting and expanding the theological distinctions of Lombard already started in the 13th century, when the *Sententiae* became the textbook for theology students at the European universities. For example, the question why God became man is hardly mentioned here (see book 3, distinction XIX), whereas theologians like Aquinas or Bonaventure do discuss this question, referring to the alternatives 'because of sin' and 'independent of sin'.

Lombard does not always introduce a topic by asking a question. At times he starts in a straightforward thematic way, at other times he confines himself to an enumeration of quotations. This diversity is rather characteristic of his work. The sequence of issues is generally clear, but in many details it is quite *ad hoc*. Some discussions are unexpectedly expanded (like the distinctions in book 2 on freedom and grace before the fall), others are unexpectedly brief (like the relation between law and gospel at the end of book 3). This too is partly due to the *questio*-form, since questions tend to spring from answers in the course of time; in this way discourses arise like villages and cities, with increasing density on specific spots and uncultured areas around them. Another reason for the 'unbalanced' character of Lombard's masterwork is that he intended to give a synopsis of

subjects collected from the church fathers – which must have been a *mer à boire*. ‘Sententiae’ are, literally, sayings, in this case from the Bible and from the church fathers. Like his older contemporary Hugh of St. Victor, Lombard shares the early twelfth century consensus that does not draw a clear line between the canon of the New Testament and the texts of the church fathers. However, as Silano remarks (book 1, p. XIX ff.) ‘sententiae’ are also ‘judgments’, sentences given after a trial. Together they form a case-book, presenting the *status questionis* on a wide range of issues. Lombard intends to bring in the *systematic* harvest of the *patres*, not as the final word on the issues, but as the better starting point for further understanding.

The result is an inventory of biblical and classical texts on important theological topics, not stored on shelves for preservation, but surrounded by scaffoldings enabling a variety of ‘work in progress’. Lombard, though much more modest than Abelard in this respect, is very much aware of the fact that quite some texts seem to contradict each other. Sometimes the *magister* – as Lombard was called since the 13th century – indicates his preference, or even argues for a position offered by himself; but sometimes he frankly admits that he does not see how to solve the problem or how to proceed with the analysis. This charming modesty, of course, is also an incentive for students, who are usually keen on surpassing their master. Another masterly quality of the *Sentences* is Lombard’s ability to capture abstract distinctions into a lively image. For instance when he offers an interpretation of original sin explaining that this sin, which in itself is a mental matter, is transmitted by means of the body (reproduction), since each newly created and therefore flawless soul contracts the disorders in bodily desires as soon as it is united with the body after conception – this view is summarized and elucidated by one simple simile: ‘just as a person with dirty hands does not receive a fruit as I gave it to him with my clean hands, but it was clean when I gave it’ (book 2, 163). At times the master spices his exposition by addressing his reader (student) or by introducing an opponent in a direct way. For instance: ‘Hearing this, Pelagius jumped up, saying: Why then, are little children and those who do not have grace, without which they cannot do the divine mandates, held to be guilty?’ (book 2, 140).

Despite the fact that *The Sentences* are very much a work under construction, they do have a unifying spirit; for Lombard, no doubt, is an Augustinian. By far the most authoritative texts are selected from the immense oeuvre of the bishop of Hippo. In this respect Lombard resembles Anselm, although the latter had a more direct systematic ambition in pursuing the inner logic in Augustine’s major insights. (The specifically Anselmian doctrines are remarkably absent in *The Sentences*, however). For Lombard such a penetration was less easy, since half a century after Anselm systematic reflection had grown wings. A number of questions cannot be posed and answered by means of patristic or biblical texts anymore; in those cases Lombard inserts paraphrases of unnamed theologians (‘some say. . .’), contemporaries presenting new problems or alternative solutions (like Gilbert of Poitiers). It is a pity that Silano does not give these references – now they must be checked in the Latin edition (Grottaferrata 1971/1981) or in Marcia Colish’s two volume study on Lombard (1994). In his recurrence to the

doctor gratiae Lombard is cautious, if not conservative. Not only Augustine's most welcomed ideas but also those that will be abandoned by most Medievals – and will be resumed by many Reformers – are prominent in Lombard's selection. Like the idea that original sin is to be identified as concupiscence which, together with a certain guilt, is transmitted from parents to children by means of the sexual pleasure or lust in which children are conceived.

Maybe *The Sentences* still have another future, and for protestant theology as well. In the last decennia there has been a general tendency in Western European theology to jump over elaborated dogmatic and (neo)scholastic positions and recur to the less differentiated, 'more seminal' thoughts of the church fathers. There has been a renaissance in patristic studies, also among systematic theologians. However, if we are to gain from patristic theology systematically, beyond historical, linguistic or cultural enrichment, we need to elaborate on its most promising *positions*. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition a Maximus Confessor may seem to be the summit, though that may be misleading since for Westerners, later theologians like Philoponos are still largely out of sight. Anyway, for the Western tradition we do have a more systematic follow up. In flushing the dirty water of 'scholasticism' or 'onto-theology' we may have flushed the child as well. If we wish to grow in theological reflection, we have to come to terms with scholastic theology in a more constructive way than has been done during the last two centuries. One way of doing this is to profit from the renewal of patristic study and move onwards to that century which has been called 'the Renaissance of the 12th century'. In that Renaissance Europe did not primarily turn to its Ancient roots, but to its Christian inspiration. In the first half of that century the major figures receiving the patristic legacy and elaborating on it in a congenial way *before* the rapid rise of scholastic 'specialization', are Anselm and Bernard, Hugh of St. Victor and Peter Lombard. Bernard has been called the last church father, Hugh the *alter augustinus*.

So I do hope that Silano's effort will pay off not only for students of the *history* of theology. *Systematically* we may also profit from Lombard, especially in two ways. We may gain directly by his differentiating semantic-logical analysis showing that certain ways of putting things are not wrong, but ambiguous, in need for a more accurate determination of meaning. By this instrument many 'sentences' from Ambrose or Hilary or Augustine can be rendered more precisely than they themselves are. At first we may feel as contemporaries and even students of William Harvey felt when he opened the human body: as if a *corpus* of impressive and suggestive formulations is dissected. Yet, without this 'anatomy' the art of diagnosis and cure would not have advanced as it did. In the high Middle Ages respect for authoritative texts did not prohibit free questioning, on the contrary. Besides, establishing a more precise sense does not necessarily mean *contradicting* the original spokesman. At one point Augustine seems to posit pride before the fall, for how can man sin if there is no instigation to sin? After showing that 'some' have taken this view to mean that there was something sinful in man before sinning, Lombard replies (book 3, 98) that 'the aforesaid words of Augustine pressingly require a pious and diligent reader', we best read Augustine to refer to an instigation elicited in Adam after the temptation of the devil—

In this kind of ‘close reading’ translation plays an important indicative role. The English Lombard does not run ‘smoothly’, but neither does the Latin. Silano translates carefully, but not very concordant. I am not sure – to take another example from the context of original sin – whether it is helpful to translate ‘culpa’ and ‘reatus’ with ‘fault’, ‘guilt’ or ‘liability’ *alternately*. Lombard’s phrasing does not seem fixed at this point (his use of terms seems in fact a little less conscious than Augustine’s), but systematically this may be a premature anticipation.

We may also profit from Lombard in an indirect way: wherever he does not seem troubled by holding positions which, to our mind, are on a collision course. To his mind, most likely, they are connectible somehow. Let me conclude this review by one example. In book 1 distinction 42–44, on divine power, an Augustinian emphasis on God’s un-changeability is juxtaposed by the conviction that God can be or act in a different way. Obviously, for Lombard immutability must be compatible with contingency. The first question reads: can God do *other* things than he does? He certainly can, Lombard argues. God can will things he has never willed. On the other hand, whatever he wills now, he wills eternally; for God cannot have a new volition. The divine will cannot change. But obviously, that does not make it necessary. Here, the master’s ‘sentence’ implicitly presupposes, contrary to Ancient and Modern intuition, that immutability does not coincide with necessity. Conceptually this would not become explicit until the late 13th century. The next question is: can God do things *better* than he does? Abelard’s emphatic ‘no’ – implying not only the necessity of creation, but also that of Christ’s loving sacrifice at the cross – had posed this ‘single most controversial question in the first half of the 12th century’ (Colish). Again Lombard appears to be both precise and unsuspecting in combining two seemingly opposed answers. God can make a better world than the present one; but he cannot produce a being equal to himself. So on the one hand, the world is not the best-possible. It is good, yet perfectible. On the other hand, there cannot be another best-possible being. There can only be one God. Does this mean that God cannot produce the best-possible at all? No; but the best-possible can only be produced ‘from his substance’, Lombard claims, and that can only be internal to God. At this point, one generation after Lombard, Richard of St. Victor will attempt to prove that another God cannot be produced indeed, yet another and third divine *persona* can, and must. Lombard’s example of best-possible production, offered indirectly, is that of divine knowledge. A lesson from history is *ipso facto* a hint for future learning. Sometimes being less innovating brings us closer to the truth.