

# REVIEWING DANTE'S THEOLOGY

VOLUME 1



Edited by Claire E. Honess and Matthew Treherne

Peter Lang

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*Reviewing Dante's Theology*, which forms the first two volumes of the book series Leeds Studies on Dante, is the product of a workshop held in April 2008 in the Leeds Humanities Research Institute at the University of Leeds, organized by the Leeds Centre for Dante Studies, and of a subsequent seminar held at the University of Cambridge in November 2008. The workshop aimed to take stock of what had become a vibrant field of study, and to suggest future directions for research. Each participant was invited to present an overview of a particular topic, to sum up the achievements of scholarship so far, and to suggest some of the future directions for research. Crucially, by bringing together researchers working on diverse aspects of Dante's theology, we aimed to avoid the danger of fragmentation which often accompanies a major topic in a vast field such as Dante studies. Collectively, we wished to test the boundaries of that field. The spirit and tone of the conversations at our workshops reflect the energy currently being devoted to these questions, a genuine willingness on the part of participants to learn from each other and to share ideas, and a common acknowledgment that the study of Dante's theology needed to be a shared, rather than an individual, endeavour.

These two volumes of essays, which reflect both the range and focus of discussions at the workshops, are an invitation to others to join that endeavour. Each essay takes stock of existing scholarship on its topic, offers original readings of Dante's work, and presents reflections upon future directions. Together, the essays do not offer a single, unified 'manifesto' for the future of studies on Dante's theology; but they do indicate a range of ways in which Dante's readers might pursue the issues raised. We hope that

1 Our thanks to Abigail Rowson for her comments on a draft of this Introduction.

these two volumes will help provide a firm grounding for future research and thinking on Dante's theology, by setting out some of the key questions. We have not aimed to be comprehensive – this is not an encyclopedia on Dante's theology – but we have aimed to give as broad as possible an overview of the field.<sup>2</sup>

A number of questions cut across the essays, and were the focus of lively discussion in our workshops. First was the question of definition. Is it legitimate to define any of what Dante does over the course of his writing – and in particular in the *Commedia* – as 'theology'? Conventional medieval definitions of theology would not have permitted this. (The essays by Zygmunt Barański, on 'Doctrine', and Albert Ascoli, on the relationship of theology and poetry, take on this question directly, although it comes up repeatedly in various forms throughout these volumes.) One theme which emerged in our discussions was that, in writing about Dante, we tend to use '-ologies' as shorthand, in ways which can be misleading. To speak of Dante's Christology or ecclesiology can be unhelpful, for instance, when Dante's treatment of Christ or the Church is only partly carried out in explicit theoretical discussion (in her essay in this volume on this latter topic Paola Nasti draws a valuable distinction between *Kirchenbegriff*, analysis of the nature of the Church, and *Kirchenbild*, as the use of images of the Church).

At the same time, it seems clear that Dante is not merely dressing up established theological ideas without intellectual engagement. When Dante has the souls of the theologians, representing different intellectual traditions, in the Heaven of the Sun dance, he is not merely decorating his ideas poetically. This is intellectual work (or, perhaps, play). In the genre-busting, ground-breaking *Commedia* in particular, the reader's expectations and implicit knowledge of existing definitions are always playing a role as Dante stretches the boundaries of what poetry might be expected to do. Theology becomes something other than what it was; poetry, too,

2 Readers will, without difficulty, identify gaps. We do not have, for instance, a chapter on the Bible. The central place of Scripture in theological practice is an issue which recurs across several of the essays within these volumes.

becomes something other. Again, the newness of Dante's practice in relation to theological and indeed poetic conventions is a question with which many of our contributors grapple in various ways.

A further major theme around which discussion coalesced was the question of the historical context within which Dante's and his contemporaries' theological engagement took place. A number of the essays in the second volume in particular explore the places and forms in which theology was encountered in Dante's Italy – with preaching and liturgy as two important ways of mediating theology – and the connection between theology and political life, as explored by Claire E. Honess, is an important reminder of how theology was not divorced from the social realities of late medieval Italy. Yet, as a number of essays point out in both volumes of the essay, there is still a tendency to divorce theology from the particular circumstances in which it was practised and received. How theological dialogue actually took place – in, say, the tradition of Sentence commentaries, or in the disputations that played a role in the dissemination of theology in Dante's Florence and elsewhere – remains a rich area for exploration. And how ideas were spread, received and reshaped – whether in sermons, rituals or other forms of religious practice – also promises to yield important results. Much remains to be done in this area.

What might such a historicizing approach bring? It would do a bad job, we suspect, of giving us precise details of Dante's own individual engagement with theology and how this is reflected in his works. There are no discoveries of 'smoking guns' in the essays of this volume – instances where it is possible to say with any degree of certainty that Dante encountered a particular theological idea or text and then placed it into his work. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of the essays collected here is that it is very rarely the concern of the authors to identify single sources for Dante; the recognition that encounters with theology in late medieval Italy were varied and stratified is common across these essays.

But it can tell us a lot about how theology was practised. Disputations, liturgy and preaching were all the domain of authorized theological practitioners. But they were not solely designed for authorized *audiences* – and, in various ways, they aimed to transform those audiences. We might learn a good deal, as Simon Gilson suggests in his essay on Christian

Aristotelianism, about the ways in which disputation – a model from which Dante draws at least some inspiration in the dialogues which mark the discourse of the *Paradiso* – was practised, not because Dante might have heard about an individual idea in an individual disputation, but because the disputation form was seen as a particularly important model of thinking and practice. The essays in this volume repeatedly point us towards similar examples and to the value of rich contextualization in bringing Dante's theology to life.

The essays gathered in these volumes, then, both take stock of the achievements of scholarship on Dante's theology, and offer a set of directions for future research. The first volume focuses primarily on ideas and influences within Dante's theological thought, whereas the second volume pays attention to theology in its broader social, cultural and intellectual contexts.

The essay which opens the collection, Zygmunt G. Barański's 'Dante and Doctrine (and Theology)', goes to the heart of a number of the definitional and methodological questions which ought to be prominent in the mind of anyone seeking to understand Dante's theology. In questioning the relationship between doctrine and theology, and the intellectual, affective and spiritual concerns within which Dante would have considered them, Barański opens up the wealth of possibilities attached to each term, and suggests important ways in which the 'flexible, malleable, and porous' approaches of medieval culture and thought to those ideas can enrich modern understandings of Dante.

The legacies of Aristotle and Plato form the basis of the next two chapters. As Simon A. Gilson's account of the relationship between Dante and Christian Aristotelianism demonstrates, the richness of approach which Barański advocates can be invaluable in evaluating the ways in which Dante drew on two of his most frequently identified sources: Aristotle and Aquinas. Gilson shows how Aquinas came to be established as one of Dante's major theological influences in the commentary tradition, while arguing for a much more nuanced account of how Aquinas and 'Christian Aristotelianism' more generally were mediated and present in Dante's Italy. Crucially, Dante's own syncretism requires subtle reading: as Gilson concludes, Dante 'renegotiates the Aristotelian heritage' not

only through dialogue with scholastic thought, but also with other poetic and cultural models.

Patrick M. Gardner takes on the thorny question of the presence of Plato and of forms of Platonism in Dante. Gardner offers an important clarification of the different degrees by which one might speak of Platonism in relation to any late medieval thinker: through the integration of Platonic notions into Christian thought; by a preference for Platonic notions above competing ideas; and by an out-and-out preference for Plato's doctrines as a source of wisdom. This clarification offers a path through debates around Dante and his 'Platonism'; it also enables Gardner to develop a careful account of the ways in which the various Platonic sources would be available to Dante, and of how he uses them: the *Timaeus*; the works of the Pseudo-Dionysius and Boethius; the *Book of Causes*. Gardner then shows how this analysis can lead to rich, novel readings of key passages in the *Commedia*, such as the reference to the *Timaeus* in *Paradiso* IV, or Statius' account of the creation of the human person in *Purgatorio* XXV.

Dante's engagement with Augustine is the focus of Elena Lombardi's chapter, which describes 'the longevity, adaptability, and transformational nature of medieval Augustinianism', thereby setting out some of the methodological challenges in considering how Dante encountered and viewed the thought of the Bishop of Hippo. Lombardi traces the way in which Augustine has come to be seen as an important source in Dante, starting with the commentary of Dante's own son, Pietro. The chapter goes on to show the complex and subtle ways in which consideration of Dante's Augustinianism can cast light on the poet's understandings of language, desire and exile, with implications for our reading of the whole of the *Commedia*.

In his essay on Gregory the Great and Dante, Vittorio Montemaggi shows how Dante's apparently minor, scattered references to Gregory (which Montemaggi wryly describes as 'two subordinate references and a reference to a mistake on a very important theological question') reveal the importance of his engagement with the author of the *Moralia in Iob*. Given the importance of Gregory's work in the Middle Ages, it is perhaps surprising that his influence on Dante has been largely underplayed; Montemaggi demonstrates the striking possibilities that emerge when the



*Commedia* is read with an openness to the significant role that Gregory might play, the references to Gregory forming a pattern which has much to tell us about the nature of Dante's theological enterprise.

The first volume closes with Tamara Pollack's essay on the beatific vision. Pollack pays close attention to the language used by Dante to describe the pilgrim's vision of God, showing how the terms he uses relating to light, love and joy represent an engagement in theological debate around the nature of the beatific vision. In particular, these terms relate to the elements of beatitude known as the 'dowries of the soul', leading into rich theological debate. The essay concludes with the important suggestion that the language relating to the beatific vision connects closely with Dante's self-presentation as poet, thereby creating an important link between the 'poetic' and the 'doctrinal' dimensions of the text.

The second volume opens with Albert Ascoli's account of how Dante presents the relationship between theology and poetry in his work. Ascoli delineates clearly the different ways in which theology could have been seen as a practice – as a reader or interpreter of Scripture, or as a human 'author' of Scripture – and uses this distinction to show that it is on this 'slippery slope between reading and writing that Dante consistently places his most explicit and his most famous meditations on the relationship between poetry and theology'. Revisiting some of the passages in Dante's work which are most frequently associated with the relationship between theology and poetry – *Convivio* II. i; the *Epistle to Cangrande*, *Purgatorio* II and XXIV; *Paradiso* XXV and XXVI – Ascoli argues that ultimately, in the *Commedia*, 'Dante repeatedly claims that theology is, finally, necessarily, poetic'.

In the following essay, Paola Nasti discusses the ways in which Dante engages with questions of ecclesiology, paying particular attention to the connection between hermeneutics and thought about the Church in *Monarchia*. Her starting point is the observation that medieval ecclesiological discourse is not only present in treatises devoted explicitly to questions of Church, but also in diverse genres such as liturgical commentary, Biblical exegesis, sermons and hagiography. In the *Commedia*, Dante explores ecclesiological questions through metaphor and imagery rather than through systematic discussion; in the *Monarchia*, it is through

Dante's concern with proper Biblical interpretation and hermeneutics that his ecclesiology emerges.

The worship of the Church is the focus of Ronald L. Martinez's essay, which offers a full account of the ways in which Dante might have experienced the liturgy, as well as a very wide-ranging review of the places where that experience appears to have shaped his works. The connections between liturgy and the poet's thought and practice are often profound and surprising: for instance, in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Martinez argues, 'the liturgical and linguistic urges' are in co-operation – an insight which opens up important readings of Dante's other works. Martinez demonstrates not only the depth and breadth of the presence of liturgy in Dante's works, but also the significance of it for our interpretation of them.

Claire E. Honess's essay examines the connection between Dante's theological and political thought. Starting with the way in which the motif of exile carries both political dimensions and theological connotations for Dante, Honess draws out the close links between theological and political ideas about community, peace, and the city. The essay concludes by showing how the figure of the exile offers Dante a position from which his poetic, theological and political voice can best emerge in the context of his world.

One of the most prominent forms in which religious discourse was experienced in Dante's Italy was preaching; George Ferzoco's essay offers an overview of how preaching, as a form of 'vernacular theology', shaped the reception of theological ideas and religious culture. In turn, Ferzoco argues, preaching would have helped shape Dante's early readers' understanding of the *Commedia*; he offers three case studies, drawn from the *Paradiso*, to show how apparently strange and difficult passages in the text can be more easily grasped through an appreciation of the place of preaching in late medieval life.

One of the concerns of preachers was to bring about moral change in their audience; and the notion of moral change is key to Ruth Chester's essay on virtue in Dante. Exploring the ways in which virtue had been described by theologians such as Gregory the Great and Augustine, as well as in the Aristotelian tradition, Chester shows how Dante's use of the term 'virtù' draws together understandings of God's creative power and of the moral practice carried out by the human person. For Dante, 'man's salvation is



achieved through taking in and manifesting God's own virtue'. Virtue, Chester argues, draws together concerns with ethics and metaphysics in ways which have considerable significance in Dante's thought.

The volume closes with Zygmunt G. Barański's essay examining the question of Dante's orthodoxy. Barański argues that modern accounts – which have often wished to stress Dante's 'unorthodoxy' – have tended to oversimplify the ways in which late medieval culture considered questions of heresy, error and orthodoxy. Dante's energy and eclecticism, Barański argues, need 'to be understood, in the first instance, in terms of his faith'. From this perspective, then, Barański offers a view of Dante's intellectual practice whereby for human beings, 'the responsibility, not unlike that shouldered by the author of the *Convivio*, is to gather together these "truthful" "crumbs" in order to try to transcend the fragmentariness of our knowledge and achieve a somewhat fuller intimation, even though this will always amount to no more than an approximation, of the absolute Truth that is God'.