

Oliver D. Crisp. *Analyzing Doctrine: Toward a Systematic Theology*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019. x+280 pp. \$39.95 (hbk).

Andrew Dole
Amherst College

Analyzing Doctrine is a fine and substantive addition to Oliver Crisp's corpus, and so also to that of analytic theology. It develops Crisp's position with respect to a number of key doctrinal themes in conversation with both classical and contemporary interlocutors, and serves as a promissory note for an analytic systematic theology. The core chapters are concerned with the elements of what Crisp regards as "the theological core of the Christian faith" (2), bookended by sections concerned with theological method. As a whole the book attempts to provide "something like a dogmatic sketch of some of the main load-bearing structures around which a systematic theology would be built" (2). The sketch that results suggests interesting times ahead.

In his Introduction Crisp describes *systematic* theology as "an organized, integrated, and systematic account of the various doctrines of the Christian faith", and *dogmatic* theology as a branch of this which is "focused on giving an account of dogma—that is, the conceptual core of the Christian faith" as articulated in, for example, "the great creeds and the confessions and catechisms of particular churches" (3f.). A *constructive* systematic dogmatics might aim to move beyond historical formulations towards "a new synthetic theological whole" (4f.). Crisp's first chapter offers an initial statement of *analytic* systematic theology as one that "utilizes the tools and methods of contemporary analytic philosophy for the purpose of constructive Christian theology, paying attention to the Christian tradition and development of doctrine" (32). A good bit of the chapter is concerned to defend analytic theology as "real" theology and not just philosophy in disguise. Against the notion that analytic theology has become a distinct "school", Crisp argues that it is rather a "centered group" without an identifiable outer boundary. And—more importantly, in my view—in response to the Barth-inspired view that theology insists on the subordination of nontheological disciplines to itself (the opposite position when it comes to philosophy, I take it, being 'rationalism'), Crisp argues that "analytic theology is not necessarily rationalistic, and as practiced today it is almost without exception done in a manner that makes philosophy's role that of the traditional handmaiden to the queen of the sciences" (26).

The topics of the core chapters of the book fall into three categories: concerning God, concerning Christ, and concerning human persons. As his most general framework for theological reflection on the divine, Crisp defends *chastened theism*, a theologically realist position that holds that although God is "deeply mysterious and ultimately beyond human ken", because of God's self-revelation in Christ "we can know things about the divine nature" (47). Chastened theism is "self-consciously traditioned" in two senses. First, chastened

theism accepts that theology generally is “the human attempt to articulate something about the divine nature”, such that any given body of theological work is fallible and subject to correction and expansion (49f). But second, chastened theism also involves appeals to biblical and theological traditions as resources for theological reasoning. I would be inclined to say that chastened theism has a conflicted relationship to tradition; Crisp does not put it this way.

Crisp introduces a methodologically powerful device in discussing divine simplicity and the Trinity: the device of regarding sets of claims about God as *models* of the truth rather than as statements of the truth *simpliciter*. A model is not a metaphor, an analogy, or a fiction: it is “an approximation to the truth of the matter, which may be beyond our ken” (71). Crisp offers a “parsimonious statement” of divine simplicity (God is a concrete, immaterial personal entity who is essentially metaphysically noncomposite and exemplifies distinct attributes) as a model in this sense: *qua* model, it “concedes the more controversial aspects of the maximal doctrine to its contemporary critics while holding out a hand towards the traditionalists” (71). In discussion of the Trinity he redescribes a model as “a simplified conceptual framework or description” of a complex original (86), where the divine nature is “complex” not in the sense of being non-simple, but rather in the sense of being difficult to understand (87n16). Crisp presents a “chastened mysterian model” of the Trinity, one which takes the divine nature to be only partly cognizable by human beings (i.e. mysterious) and where the terms “person” and “essence” are placeholders, such that “we do not have a clear conceptual grip on their semantic content” (100). Before moving on from the divine nature he considers a set of challenges to the atemporality of God, a position which “can claim to be the default option in historical Christianity, even if it is currently out of favor” (108). The most pressing are products of Barth’s claim that, as Bruce McCormack puts it, “Jesus is the electing God” (114). Crisp promises a way to reconcile divine atemporality with a Christ-centric doctrine of election—a way to “have our proverbial cake and eat it too”—to be worked out in the following chapters (120).

Turning to Christ, Crisp expands on his earlier defense of an “Incarnation anyway” position, according to which “union with human beings is a fundamental aim in creation independent of any human fall” (122). Here Crisp offers an admittedly speculative account of the Incarnation as a fitting (but not necessary) means for God to bring about this union. Crisp suggests that the Incarnation “provides something like a hub, by means of which other human beings can access the divine and participate in union with God”, to be realized through “the secret working of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ” (125, 128). A (clearly stated but undefended) premise of this account is that any union between God and creatures requires “special divine action”, such that “even a sinless creature is not in a position to be united to God” (130). Crisp then offers a *moderate Reformed doctrine of original sin*, according to which sin is a corruption inherited by all persons “after the first sin” save Christ, such that all such persons will inevitably and culpably sin, although they are culpable neither for the originating sin nor for the condition of original sin; Crisp is agnostic about whether the first sin was committed by just two persons or by an “original human community” (153ff.).

Crisp’s chapters on the virgin birth and Christ’s two wills are, as he notes later, defensive in nature: each chapter considers objections of recent provenance (predominantly from Andrew Lincoln on the first topic, and from a range of contemporary evangelical

sources on the second), finding in the end that none are weighty enough to dislodge the orthodox forms of the doctrine in question. Crisp's approach will be familiar to readers of Christian analytic philosophers, particularly where he demonstrates that while particular objections may have purchase against certain formulations of the doctrines, these can also be understood in ways that are not similarly vulnerable.

The final two chapters are constructive, in that Crisp develops novel, but still orthodox, understandings of classical positions. One chapter is concerned with the notion of participation in the divine life, and Crisp defends an account according to which this participation is a matter of progressively coming to exemplify the attributes of the human nature of Christ without thereby losing one's individuality (that is, without being assumed by the divine nature). And in the second chapter Crisp engages Robert Jenson's position regarding the location of the postresurrection body of Jesus—that this body is “whatever makes Christ available to us”—arguing that the “availability” of Christ need not be quite so immediate after the resurrection as before, and that (following Hud Hudson) supposing the postresurrection body of Christ to have been “translated” to a spacetime adjacent to our own (i.e. hyperspace) is consistent with orthodox doctrine.

The book moves *toward* a systematic theology in at least one straightforward sense: what look like possible structural (“load-bearing”) elements of a systematic theology emerge as the arguments of the book unfold. While the conclusion to the book largely summarizes the core chapters, it also takes note of some of these structural elements and places them in relation to each other. This arrangement suggests that the successor to *Analyzing Doctrine* might open with theological prolegomena. Such a prolegomena would do well, I think, to devote sustained attention to some areas of tension that Crisp's developing system seems to contain. I will identify four such areas.

The first area of tension surrounds the device of the doctrinal model. One general issue is that “simplified” models may not contain features that their originals have, such that one can be misled by drawing conclusions from the features of the model: a model of an airplane may not be aerodynamically sound or may contain no moving parts, where that which it represents is and does. Thus where the original (the triune nature of God) is unavailable to us, it is an open question how much confidence we should place in the entailments of any particular model of the Trinity—so, for example, how bothered we should be if some of those entailments conflict with other commitments. And if Crisp's observation that “theological models can be revised or overturned by more accurate, or more comprehensive, or more helpful models that better approximate the truth of the matter as expressed in revelation and tradition” represents an acknowledgment of this issue, then the circumstance that generates the need for the model in the first place—the unavailability to us of what the model represents—raises the question of how the theologian is to recognize that one model “approximates the truth” more accurately than another (239). A second issue concerns the conditions under which a doctrinal statement should or may be construed as a model. One possibility is that the theologian may construe such a statement as a model whenever a univocal construal presents insurmountable problems, say, of intrasystematic coherence (but doctrines can certainly present other sorts of problems than this). And finally, the fact that dogmas can be modeled—there are the dogmas of divine simplicity and the Trinity, and there are models of these—raises the question of what significance, for the believer, should be attached to the “canonical forms” of dogmas (191). If some of these are

linguistic placeholders for matters beyond our ken, it would seem that the models that theologians construct give us a kind of access that the dogmatic language itself does not. What would it be to “believe” a dogma of this kind, such that belief and nonbelief fall on either side of the boundary of Christian identity?

A second area of tension surrounds Crisp’s statement that “it seems to me extremely implausible that God would allow the vast majority of the church to be led into error on a matter central to the faith” (191). This statement occurs in the course of his engagement with Jordan Wessling’s defense of monothelitism, and it is potentially a powerful, even conversation-stopping, claim. For whatever other arguments might be presented on either side of the question, given that dithelitism has the sanction of ecumenical conciliar authority, to allow that monothelitism is true “is tantamount to God permitting the vast majority of Christians down through the ages to believe a falsehood about the manner in which he brought about human salvation in Christ” (193). This strikes me as a rich area for theological reflection. It supposes more than that God actively supervises (or predetermines) a set of human deliberations so that they produce the results that God desires: it also supposes that it is quite important to God that certain human beings have correct beliefs concerning, for example, just how many wills Christ has. I can imagine different answers to the question of why the latter should be so; none seem obviously true. I also think that a repeated deployment of this judgment as a finishing blow against challenges to orthodoxy will be uninteresting to the extent that implausibility, however extreme, is taken to entail falsehood. Far more interesting would be a treatment that remains mindful that implausible things do happen.

A third area of tension concerns the role of “biblical traditions” in a Crispian analytic systematic theology. Crisp notes that Lincoln brings to the forefront the important issue of “how the biblical and postbiblical traditions are to be weighted in making theological judgments”, and voices approval of his efforts to integrate biblical scholarship and systematic theology (177). But it is not clear how important biblical scholarship will be for Crisp. On his view Lincoln “gives primacy to the biblical texts as understood by historical biblical criticism”, such that “the postbiblical tradition is, in principle, revisable in light of new ways of looking at the biblical material—even if the topic in question is deeply embedded in the creedal and confessional tradition of the church” (177). I judge it significant that Crisp has Lincoln appealing to “new ways of looking at the biblical material” rather than to, say, “biblical traditions”. For the real question for the theologian, I think, is whether to accept that biblical scholarship ever makes biblical traditions available to theology, as I believe it sometimes aspires to do. Crisp later describes Wessling as appealing to “a supposed biblical tradition”, and his position as “very difficult to sustain independent of particular interpretive strategies for reading the relevant biblical material, which are contested in the tradition” (193). But I do not see why the theologian who admits the possibility of conflict between biblical and postbiblical traditions should regard the fact that a particular interpretive strategy is contested in the tradition as something worth noting, and far less as any sort of reason to be skeptical of the tradition it purports to uncover.

A final, and quite broad, area of tension centers on the relationship between theology and philosophy in an analytic systematic theology, and in particular on the bugbear of rationalism. Whatever rationalism is, I do not think that skill in avoiding it generally accompanies facility with analytic philosophy. I do not think that a systematic theology that

is analytic will thereby be naturally antithetical to rationalism, and in fact I worry that an analytic systematic theology that wants to satisfy even well-mannered Barthian sentiments in this area is going to need fairly specific instructions (and may want these to be backed up by reasons). Mike Rea takes analytic philosophy to include an unwillingness to allow untranslated metaphors to do substantive work. The prolegomena to an aspirationally non-rationalistic analytic systematic theology might usefully translate the idea that philosophy is to serve theology as its handmaiden into clearer language.

Analyzing Doctrine is a rewarding work in itself and at the same time a tantalizing glimpse of things to come. Crisp's signature patience, penetration, and substantive engagement with historical resources are on full display here. Perhaps the outlines of a theological superstructure are also emerging; but there remains room for surprises yet to come.