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The Trinity: Global Perspectives

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (hereafter VMK) is Professor of Systematic Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* is his eleventh book published in English and it is one that has filled a noticeable gap in books on Trinitarian theology. VMK's goal in this book is to bring Trinitarian theologians from around the globe into conversation with one another and "*offer several views into the theology of religions discourse through the lens of the Trinity.*" (xix)

Like many other books on the subject VMK has chosen several theologians to examine and critique but unlike these other works he's moved out of the Euro-Anglo-American box and expanded to Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The book is divided into five sections:

1. The Biblical Roots of the Doctrine of the Trinity
2. The Historical Growth of Trinitarian Traditions
3. Contemporary Trinitarian Views: Western Theologies
4. Contemporary Trinitarian Views: Non-Western Views
5. Toward a Renewed Trinitarian Theology in the World Context

But of these five, sections 3 & 4 take center stage and are subdivided as follows:

Western

- A. European Traditions
- B. North American Traditions: Dialogue with European Views

Non-Western

- A. The Trinity in Latin American and Hispanic Perspectives
- B. The Trinity in Asian Perspectives
- C. The Trinity in African Perspectives

The European section features four German (speaking) theologians out of the five that were surveyed, i.e., Karl Barth (ch. 5), Karl Rahner (ch. 6), Jürgen Moltmann (ch. 8), and Wolfhart Pannenberg (ch. 9). The only non-German (speaking) theologian covered in this section was John Zizioulas (ch. 7). Noticably absent from the list are any British representatives, e.g., Thomas F. Torrance or Colin Gunton. He's well aware of their absence and notes it in the introduction (xx). Apparently they didn't meet his two criteria of (1) theological and ecumenical diversity, and (2) continuing influence on worldwide discourse (or perhaps they did and he omitted them for reasons unknown). While I understand that it would be impossible to cover every theologian of note I think that passing over these two (or at the very least not including one of them) was a mistake on VMK's part.

The North American theologians examined are those that are typical in books of this kind with a few that I wouldn't have expected to see. They are: Robert Jenson (ch. 11), Catherine Mowry LaCugna (ch. 12), Elizabeth Johnson (ch. 13), Millard Erickson (ch. 14), S. Mark Heim (ch. 15), Ninian Smart & Steven Konstantine (ch. 16). I must at this point confess of ignorance of the last three theologians covered and my surprise with the choice of Erickson, as I've never felt that his work was that important or impactful. This is something that even VMK takes note of when he says, "*Unlike other contemporary theologians discussed in this book, Erickson's Trinitarian proposal has not elicited much response. To my knowledge, there are only two major reviews of his monograph on the Trinity.*" (226)

When VMK moves into the Non-Western theologians the lists are slim but he chose some well respected names to engage from the Latin American/Hispanic world with Brazilian liberation-theologian Leonardo Boff (ch. 19) and Cuban theologian/historian Justo L. González (ch. 20). The Asian theologians covered were N. Korea's Jung Young Lee (ch. 22) and India's Raimundo Panikkar (ch. 23) who both work and write from America. When turning to Africa, the Roman Catholic Charles Nyamiti of the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and Adonija O. Ogbonnaya are engaged in what I felt was the most fascinating portion of the book (especially Nyamiti's 'ancestral view of the Trinity').

It was this section that was the most enlightening, providing an introduction for me to many new theologians. The only two I had heard of or read prior to VMK's work were Boff and González. Interestingly enough (for a global treatment), aside from neglecting British theologians and authors, VMK also neglected our friends from down under. Readers might have benefited from some recognition of Australians such as Anne Hunt of Australian Catholic University or Denis Edwards of Flinders University. Perhaps a companion volume could be written or some of these names added in a revised version somewhere down the line.

For the most part VMK is concise with his treatments of each theologian although more space and attention was devoted to Moltmann and Pannenberg than any other theologian. I think his descriptions are largely accurate for those theologians I am familiar with and I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt concerning those I'm not. He's both fair

and firm in his examination and critical responses, as he doesn't seek to simply present the conversation, or put various theologians into conversation with each other, but rather he joins in with constructive criticism that can provide some well needed corrections as well as a way forward in the ongoing task of Trinitarian theology.

I particularly appreciated his critique of "social trinitarians" who base their idea of God's unity in the ancient concept of perichoresis. He notes in his criticism of Boff that the unity of God was the presupposition underlying John of Damascus' concept of perichoresis and in this he is surely correct (290). His criticism of Erickson's methodology which doesn't allow us to view the immanent Trinity (IT) in light of the economic Trinity (ET) was also welcome. VMK says that:

If we cannot or should not [ascend from the ET to the IT], we would not have any reliable way of establishing the deity of the Son and by extension the deity of the Spirit—unless we do it on the basis of face value biblical statements. This, however, is extremely problematic for theologians and can hardly convince many outside of the most conservative wing of the theological guild. (229)

Erickson's refusal here is the result of his seeking to avoid any kind of subordination in the Trinity. VMK sees a way to do this while still allowing the ET to guide us in our understanding of the IT which is recognizing that the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit in salvation history "*clearly indicates that the kind of subordinationism that posits the Father one-sidedly as the source or relegates the Son and Spirit to a lesser role cannot be substantiated.*" (229) VMK does recognize a priority that the Father has, but not one that violates the mutual interdependence of the three. In essence VMK agrees with Erickson, but in method he finds fault, as do I.

Space prohibits me from elaborating on all that this book has to offer the interested reader, but I'd like to take some time in future posts to introduce others to some of these lesser known theologians through the work of VMK. The major positive aspect of this work is in its filling a gap left by other similar titles; the major weakness is that in filling this gap certain theologians that probably should have been addressed were not. Concerning the more minor issues, footnotes are maintained throughout, there is a two-page author index, and a seven-page subject index. Unfortunately there is no bibliography which would have been extremely helpful given how heavily footnoted this volume is. I think that VMK has done the theological world a great service in producing this volume and it will be one that I regularly reference for many years to come.