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Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
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Written in honor of the late Colin E. Gunton, *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* gathers some of the best and brightest in the field to contribute essays on the “major themes of systematic theology in their classical order, yet from a Trinitarian point of view.” (From the back cover) As is always the case with a book of this sort, it is not possible to give attention to all of the essays. So I want to highlight two in particular, one that I found myself being highly critical of and the other I found myself greatly appreciating.

The first is Paul Blackham’s essay “The Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures” which is an optimistic albeit naïve attempt to argue that from the beginning the Jewish faith was trinitarian. He takes issue with the approach (made famous by Augustine) that starts with the divine essence and moves to the three persons, and rightfully so, but in the midst of this he sees fit to pit trinitarianism against monotheism. He says:

If the so-called *essence* of God is defined *a priori*, in advance of careful investigation of the Three Persons who actually *are* the Living God, then we must expect that our thinking about God will tend to default to a kind of monotheism. The tension between monotheism and Trinitarianism is something of which we are all aware. (36)

This is a strange dichotomy since trinitarianism is a “kind of monotheism,” i.e. Trinitarian monotheism as opposed to Unitarian or Binitarian monotheism. The tension isn’t as much between trinitarianism and monotheism as it is between trinitarianism and Unitarianism. But from here he goes on to rightly criticize the belief that Christians, Jews, and Muslims all worship the same God, laying the blame for such a belief at the feet of classical theism. I’m inclined to agree on this point as Thomistic theology and the “classical” arguments for the existence of God only yield *a god* and not necessarily the Triune God. This is a weakness that critics of classical apologetics have been pointing out for quite some time.

My other problems with this essay are his failure to recognize a distinction between the Trinity *qua* Trinity and the *doctrine* of the Trinity. By blurring this line he argues that the Trinity as a doctrine did not develop but was present in the Hebrew Scriptures. He then turns to the usage of certain OT passages (e.g. Ps. 2:7; 45:6-7; 104:4; 2Sam. 7:14) in the book of Hebrews and later to Justin Martyr and other early Christian writers such as Irenaeus' readings of certain OT texts to support his argument. But as I recently said to a commentator on my blog:

[S]ince the God of the NT is the God of the OT, then the Trinity has always been present in the text; we just needed the incarnation of the Son and the indwelling of the Spirit to realize it.

Yes, the triune God was present throughout Israel's history, and certainly existed in the OT text, but without the incarnation and subsequent sending of the Spirit we wouldn't have known this. The writer of Hebrews, Justin Martyr, and the other early Christian writers whom Blackham mentions all wrote from a pneumatically indwelt post-incarnational perspective. So it is correct to say that the Trinity (as God) is in the text, but there is no harm in saying that as a *doctrine* it developed over time. The children of Israel cannot be expected to have understood God in the way that the Church of Jesus Christ later did.

The second essay I wish to highlight is one from Colin Gunton himself. His contribution "Towards a Trinitarian Reading of the Tradition: The Relevance of the Eternal Trinity" was originally published as the 6th chapter of his book *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes*. In this essay he attempts to define God narratively saying that:

[W]e can say that in Scripture God is presented both narratively and creedally: in narratives of actions and in creedal summaries of the meaning of those actions, summaries which were developed and systematized in the early centuries of the church's life. (64)

Gunton suggests that "We know *who* God is from what he does." (65) I couldn't agree more! When speculating about the eternal relationship of the Trinity *ad intra* we need to keep a focused eye on the Trinity's operations *ad extra*. The way that God works in the world reveals something about who God is in himself.

Gunton's discussion of the freedom of God is brilliant. He sees God's freedom as grounded in love. I most appreciated his insight that:

[W]ithout a fully Trinitarian construal of divine freedom, we shall be in danger of being left with a mere voluntarism, a *potentia absoluta* which appears to give God no reason to create except sheer arbitrariness. On such an account, he creates by sheer will, and not by a will formed by love. (69)

It is from this loving freedom of God that we derive our freedom, for no one is truly free when they are separated from a loving relationship with God. In Gunton's words, "*human freedom comes from the divine action that graciously creates, upholds, and redeems the creature who has preferred slavery to freedom.*" (69)

Other essays of note are Murray Rae's "Prolegomena" in which he contends that to even speak truthfully about God is itself an action of the Triune God. Kelly M. Kopic's contribution "Trajectories of a Trinitarian Eschatology" was also fascinating. He looks at the unity of action and movement in the Trinity concluding that:

God has made himself known in the full self-revelation of his Son, the eschatological man, who brought the Kingdom of God into the present, embodying a new aeon in himself out of the old, sinful, chaotic perishable aeon of the fallen Adam. The risen Christ sends forth the Spirit into the world, manifesting the Kingdom, re-creating and reorienting, applying the love of the Father and the grace of the Son, bringing about a new order of fellowship and hope. (200)

Such a presentation has certainly renewed my interest in eschatology! In the end I enjoyed many of the essays in this volume, and was disappointed by a few (e.g., Grenz's essay as well as Volf's), but this book is a way forward for systematic theology. It presents a way to do theology without treating the Trinity in a passing manner or relegating to an afterthought to be placed in an appendix. From beginning to end we can formulate our doctrine of God and everything that follows in Trinitarian terms and for that this book is to be commended.