
The Holy Trinity: The Debate Continued

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NOTA

The Holy Trinity: The Debate Continued

After an international, interdisciplinary, and ecumenical seminar on the Trinity (the “Trinity Summit” held over Easter 1998 in New York), Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, and I edited the proceedings: *The Trinity* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). A few months earlier I had published my own *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).¹ I want in this note to engage in dialogue with some of the reviewers, so as to develop trinitarian theology and clarify some misconceptions.

I

After an introductory survey (by myself) of major questions in trinitarian theology, *The Trinity* contained four major sections. It moved from the biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity (Craig Evans, Gordon Fee, and Alan Segal), through the classical contributions to trinitarian thought coming from the Cappadocians and St Augustine (Joseph Lienhard, Sarah Coakley, and Michel Barnes), and on to theological and philosophical debates of a systematic nature (William Alston, Brian Leftow, Stephen Davis, David Tracy, and Frans Jozef van Beeck). The last two chapters (David Brown and Marguerite Shuster) offered “practical” applications of trinitarian belief to art and preaching, respectively.

Reviews of *The Trinity*² ran all the way from hailing it as “an excellent collection of essays” (Weinandy), which maintains “a high scholarly standard”

¹ The two books in “Libri Nostri”, GREGORIANUM 81 (2000), pp. 407-08.

² The reviewers include: S. CARR, *Theology* 103 (2000), 449-50; J. DAVIES, *Church Times* 22 September 2000, 18; R.W. JENSON, *Theology Today* 57 (2000-01), 580-81; B.D. MARSHALL, *First Things* December 2000, 59-60; P.D. MOLNAR, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 66 (2001), 173-76; P. RICHARDSON, *Church of England Newspaper* 10 March 2000, 17; K. TANNER, *Journal of Religion* 81 (2001), 481-82; N.K. WATSON, *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 8 (2001), 55-56; M. WILES, *Journal of Theological Studies* 52 (2001),

with some “excellent papers” (Wiles), to dismissing the book as “a very odd volume” (Jenson). Despite his overall swipe at the book, Jenson commended five of the fourteen chapters: those by Lienhard (Jenson’s favorite), Coakley, Davis, Tracy, and Brown. Although Wiles found Davis’ refutation of what John Hick has written on the incarnation and the Trinity “only marginally relevant to this book”, Jenson commended this chapter as “profitably to be read” for having “taken down” Hick’s “doctrines”. Jenson, while approving of Tracy’s “powerful essay”,³ wanted the book as a whole to offer more systematic reflection on the Trinity. Other reviewers, however, did not support his unqualified allegation that “the volume contains no constructive work on the doctrine nor answers to currently pressing questions”. Several reviewers appreciated, for instance, “the scorching indictment of modern social trinitarianism” (Tanner), or of a trinitarian theology which highlights the communion of the three persons at the expense of the divine unity. Let us look at (a) that form of trinitarian theology and then move to some other systematic issues: (b) Augustine’s legacy, (c) the divine substance, (d) the experience of the Trinity, and (e) some “omissions” from the book.

(a) Apropos of the social trinitarianism which several contemporary systematic theologians (e.g. Jürgen Moltmann) have made a “pressing question”, the reviews by Carr and Marshall remark on the way in which Coakley’s chapter shows how social trinitarianism has no solid roots in the Cappadocian Fathers and Leftow’s chapter demonstrates its philosophical incoherence. Tanner, unlike Carr and Marshall, has noticed that my chapter also challenges the conceptual and religious adequacy of contemporary social trinitarianism and regrets its easy passage to a kind of vulgar tritheism.

Marshall, besides ignoring my criticism of a social view of the Trinity, claimed that Coakley and Leftow “consider *only* the stringent versions of social trinitarianism maintained by some analytic philosophers” and leave aside “types advanced by systematic theologians”. To be sure, Coakley and Leftow largely levelled their criticisms at such analytic philosophers as Richard Swinburne, but they also debate the social trinitarianism advanced by a theologian, David Brown, in *The Divine Trinity* and elsewhere. Marshall, however, rightly appealed to “biblical and liturgical considerations” which might well “incline people towards one or another social view of the Trinity”. Williams also recalled “the unavoidable pluralities of Christian talk about God” which are found in

488-89; R. WILLIAMS, *The Tablet* 10 June 2000, 792; T. WEINANDY, *Expository Times* August 2000, 391-92.

³ Jenson suspects that “Tracy’s essay” was “presumably written sometime before the Summit”. There is no need to make any guesses or indulge any presumptions here: as was reported in the preface to the book, *all* the chapters were written and circulated to be read by the other symposiasts *before* they met in New York for the Trinity Summit (p. v). Tracy’s chapter, in fact, was made available by him only very shortly before the Summit began.

liturgical language and which could be stated in ways that avoid the tritheistic pitfalls Leftow so thoroughly charts in some “social” theologies of the Trinity.

(b) In his review Marshall recognized the current questions about St Augustine’s influence that have been raised by a number of writers. He applauded Barnes’ response to those who accuse Augustine of relying on Neoplatonism and “hold him responsible for a supposedly chronic trinitarian deficit in Western theology”, which these authors confidently aim to make good. Several other reviewers (e.g. Williams) also found that chapter excellent; members of the Summit believed that it answered very satisfactorily criticisms that some theologians continue to press against Augustine.

(c) When devoting his chapter to defending “substance” talk as not necessarily a hindrance to dynamic trinitarian thinking, Alston did so in debate with Ted Peters, Jürgen Moltmann, John Macquarrie, and (to a lesser extent) with Robert Jenson. One might have expected Jenson in his review to have reacted to Alston’s case, but he did not have a word to say about that chapter, which Tanner characterized as “very clear and cogent”.

(d) Although Richardson judged van Beeck’s chapter on participation in the life of the Trinity “the most fascinating” — and, as one could add, also a piece of “constructive work” which Jenson should have acknowledged —, Molnar was worried that van Beeck’s approach “subverts a genuinely trinitarian understanding of God” because of its claims about human experience. While having no reservations about some of the other chapters (for instance, that by Michel (not “Michael” please) Barnes and Marguerite Shuster who does a “superb job” in showing how many preachers “canonize” their own experience), Molnar in his very careful and friendly review kept coming back to a profound criticism which no one else made: his fear of a “projection of the categories of human experience into [or onto?] God in an effort to define God by human experience”. Certainly any such projection must be avoided; the tripersonal God’s self-revelation controls and should be seen to control any human responses and descriptions, and not vice versa. Human experience must not be taken as a “source”; and that may be a problem for the chapters by Tracy⁴ and van Beeck. However, anxiety over projection should not lead to the other extreme and any tampering with the fact that human experience is the inevitable *medium* (not source) through which the divine self-revelation takes place. Molnar should not have been worried at Evans’ argument about trinitarian faith being historically rooted in Jesus’ words and deeds (which is after all a position perfectly in harmony with Chapter 1 of Vatican II’s Constitution on Divine Revelation).

⁴ Whatever the questions for Tracy and his “natural theology”, I wonder how Molnar can fail to agree with him in holding that “all reality is incarnational and trinitarian”. To deny this would logically entail holding that some reality is non-incarnational and non-trinitarian: that is to say, outside the activity of and non-disclosive of the Word and the entire Trinity. St Athanasius and St Augustine would have had a fit over such a position.

Through experiencing Jesus' words and deeds, along with their climactic aftermath in the resurrection and the sending of the Spirit, the first disciples came to acknowledge in faith Jesus' unique and divine personal identity. Evans did not "separate" Jesus' person from his work; he described the way the disciples came to experience and know Jesus; they did not *begin* by acknowledging his divinity. Likewise Molnar should not fear that the chapter by Fee reduced the doctrine of the Trinity to "a description of Christian experience"; rather Fee marshalled evidence to show how the experience of the Spirit enjoyed by Paul and his churches (an experience which was certainly "determined" by the Spirit) led them to know God as triune.

(e) Inevitably some reviewers detected theological "omissions" in *The Trinity*. While agreeing that the book provides an "interesting" discussion of "some key trinitarian themes", Carr added: "There's certainly little evidence of feminist, postmodern or political theology here." But isn't van Beeck's chapter an example of postmodern trinitarian theology? As regards feminism, Carr noted that Coakley offered a "brief" account of "the fluidity of the use of gender in Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of the relation of God to the soul in the spiritual ascent". But, in general, Carr was right. No other contributor took up the feminist questions posed in my opening chapter about naming and renaming the Trinity. Apart from some hints in the chapters by Brown and Shuster, what Williams called "the political implications of trinitarian speech" were also missing. It could have been good to examine such implications as mapped by Erik Peterson (1890-1960) and, more recently, by Donald Nicholl (1923-97) (not "David Nicholls").

Williams wanted more on "the interfaith dimension" of trinitarian theology something even more urgently desirable since 11 September 2001. The Summit and its book would have been helped here by a contribution from Jacques Dupuis. Williams regretted that Hegel and Eastern Christian perspectives had not received more attention. But even after German theology has churned over Hegel's trinitarian speculations for so long, have we all been enlightened and helped very much? I certainly agree, however, that the Summit and its subsequent book would have profited much through a contribution from an Orthodox Christian scholar. Davis and I tried for that, but we ran up against the calendar difference: our symposium took place during what was Holy Week for the Orthodox. A sixth and final "omission" on Williams' list was the "huge gap between Augustine and the twentieth century". One large figure, nevertheless, filled part of that gap: St Thomas Aquinas. Although no chapter was specifically dedicated to his trinitarian thought, a number of the contributors introduced Aquinas at appropriate points (see the index of the book for further information).

As we have seen, Bishop Rowan Williams wanted more, yet still found the whole collection "worthwhile" and many of the chapters "superbly original", "typically excellent", "very original", and so forth. Unlike Wiles who stigmatized the papers by Evans and Fee as "strongly apologetical" (is anything "apologetical" somehow in bad taste?), Williams appreciated their role in the

volume: the contributions from these “biblical scholars provide a solid defence of the idea that claims about the divinity of Jesus and therefore a plurality in the Godhead originate in the earliest days of Christian faith, indeed in the ministry of Jesus himself”. Unlike Williams, Tanner and Wiles were not so satisfied with the whole book. Tanner, while praising me for doing “a very nice job [in] laying out some of the main questions” in current trinitarian studies and appreciating “the interdisciplinary character of the volume”, missed a proper integration: for instance, “a collaborative investigation” that could “advance argument” over some of the issues that I raised. Wiles thought my opening chapter “rather superficial”,⁵ and would have preferred me to limit myself to spelling out “the nature and interrelations of the papers in the book itself”.

It was too late for me to add anything to *The Incarnation*, a third volume from our “summit” meetings in New York which appears in January 2002. But for the fourth and final symposium, which will meet at Easter 2003 in New York and discuss the redemption, once again in an interdisciplinary fashion and with many of the same symposiasts, I will keep in mind Kathryn Tanner’s criticism. I intend seeking the approval of my colleagues to conclude our meeting and subsequent volume with a manifesto: our integrated conclusions about some at least of the questions that I will raise in my introductory chapter, conclusions which will hopefully do something to advance reflection on the redemption.

II

My own *The Tripersonal God* prompted orchids as well as axes. The reviews⁶ ranged from calling it “a lucid and concise presentation of the belief at the heart of Christian faith” (Bernardi) to dismissing it for “lacking both hermeneutical sensitivity and any profound recognition of historical consciousness” (Scanlan). It was encouraging to find almost all the reviewers being so positive: “a good basic introduction to Trinitarian theology” (Browne); “an impressively concise introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity” (Carr); “a readable and informative synthesis” (Vanhooissen); “valuable and readable” (Watson).

⁵ Only Wiles disparaged my opening essay. Other reviewers called it “a characteristically clear opening chapter setting out past and present problems in the area of trinitarian reflection” (Davies), “an excellent overview of current discussions of the Trinity and its central historical and theological importance” (Molnar), “an excellent overview of the present state of trinitarian theology” (Weinandy), and “a masterly account of the state of the question” (Williams).

⁶ The reviewers include: P.J. BERNARDI, *Horizons* 27 (2000), 404-05; L.M. BROWNE, *Catholic Library World* 71 (2000), 54; S. CARR, *Theology* 103 (2000), 374-75; D.S. CUNNINGHAM, *Modern Theology* 17 (2001), 253-54; W.P. LOEWE, *Theological Studies* 61 (2000), 393; M.J. SCANLAN, *New Theology Review* 14 (2001), 84-85; M. SHIVANANDAM, *Crisis* March 2000, 46-47; G. VANHOOMISSEN, *Lumen Vitae* 55 (2000), 457; N.K. WATSON, *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 8 (2001), 54-55.

Let me take up three reviews: those by Scanlan, Shivanandam, and Cunningham, who raised a number of important questions, several of which were put more briefly by Carr and Watson.

In what was easily the most negative review, Scanlan evaluates the book as “a clear presentation of classical trinitarianism with some sensitivity to contemporary concerns”, but that is about all on the positive side. He observes that I should have paid more attention to the relevance of trinitarian doctrine to Christian living — a criticism with which I agree and to which I will return below. He also beats me over the head (a) for failing to distinguish “clearly between primary religious language and the second level language of theological reflection and clarification”; (b) for having no “hermeneutical sensitivity to the symbolic nature of religious language”; and (c) for lacking “any profound recognition of historical consciousness”. As regards (a), in my *Fundamental Theology* (e.g. pp. 10-12) I made that very point. Perhaps I should have referred to this earlier work to support what I wrote in *The Tripersonal God* about Rahner’s trinitarian theology not being “well adapted for private prayer and public worship” (p. 176) — a passage which drew fire from Scanlan. But, frankly, I find it tedious when authors quote their earlier works to support and illuminate their current publication. As regards (b) I was astonished to find myself charged with having no hermeneutical sensitivity because I described Wisdom, Word, and Spirit in the Old Testament as divine “personifications”, which express God’s revelatory and salvific activity and are both identified with God and distinguished from God. This is a view taken by a number of biblical scholars, as one can see from J.D.G. Dunn’s *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*.⁷ Both in that book and in his earlier *Christology in the Making* (2nd ed. 1989), Dunn gathered the evidence for a conclusion Scanlan seems to find objectionable: the early Christians drew on the OT language about Wisdom/Word and Spirit to express their experience of and faith in Jesus and the Spirit whom they had received. (c) When one recalls what scriptural scholars have written recently about these three OT personifications which provided a language for the new Christian talk about God, one must ask: Who shows a lack of historical consciousness at this point? Quite frankly, in recent years the charge of “lacking historical consciousness” has been used as kind of club by some theologians to express their disagreements with others. This charge often seems to amount to saying: “I am shocked that you are making a truth claim. Why aren’t you more relativist and contextualist?”

But far and away my most serious misgiving over Scanlan’s review concerns his scorning what I wrote about the personal pre-existence (dismissed by Scanlan as the “heavenly career”) of the person of the Logos to be incarnated and known historically as Jesus of Nazareth. Does Scanlan hold that the tripersonal God was not “there from the beginning”? His invitation to fulfil Schleier-

⁷ Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1998, pp. 270-72.

macher's hopes about "transforming" the doctrine of the Trinity looks a little like a slide into unitarian modalism: the God who "was in Christ", Scanlan tells us, "is in the Spirit who indwells the Church". Is Scanlan loathe to use the language of personal identification and speak about God the (Holy) Spirit and endorse the opening verse of Mark's Gospel, "the good news of Jesus Christ [who is] the Son of God"?

Shivanandam cheered me up by appreciating what *The Tripersonal God* did by firmly and fully founding the doctrine in the Scriptures — something that I have not found in other systematic treatments of the Trinity. She rightly thought my treatment of modern theologians "skimpy". But, if I were given the chance to write the book again and add one or two more chapters, I would add much more from the liturgical and mystical tradition of Catholic Christianity, both East and West. The texts of the liturgy and the writings of mystics have illuminated and fed my sense of the tripersonal God beyond what I have gleaned from works of modern theology. A further point, concerned with a distinction Shivanandam makes between "names" and "appellations". She holds that "the names for the divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" are not "merely primary". They are "ontological descriptions of the divine persons" in the way that "other appellations such as creator" are not. First, a linguistic point. In ordinary usage "appellations" are names or titles, with titles being distinctive names like "Saviour" which point to someone's attributes (in this case Jesus') and indicate someone's identity and function(s). Is it true that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "ontological descriptions" in a way that, for example, "Creator", "Word", "High Priest", and "Paraclete" are not? Surely "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" can also be called "appellations"? And surely "Creator", "Word", "High Priest", and "Paraclete", at least in some minimal sense, ontologically describe the tripersonal God? Here, as regards the main point at issue, I will stick to my case that "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" are primary and normative, but not exclusive, names (or, if you like, appellations) for the three divine persons.

Finally, Cunningham's probing review. There are five points that I wish to take up. First, he is correct in asking for more about "justice and discipleship" in a work on the Trinity. Right now I am trying to make up that deficit in a chapter for a book I am preparing on Catholicism. Second, I am sorry that my chapter on "the History of Jesus" seems to suggest that "Jesus' perspective is available in unmediated form"; in my *Christology* (Oxford University Press, 1995) I went out of my way to show that this would be an illusion. Third, the fact that in *The Tripersonal God* I cite Walter Kasper on a relational model of personhood should not be taken to mean that I have ignored the reflections on personhood coming from Nicholas Lash, Alistair McFadyen, and others. My *Christology* (pp. 234-37) gratefully refers to these contributions by Lash, McFadyen, and several others. Fourth, I would be happy if I were able to agree with Cunningham that "the personal existence of the Holy Spirit" is "not a matter of much contemporary debate". Some forms of current "Spirit Christology" from both sides of the Atlantic, in propounding "God as Spirit", seem to let any distinct,

personal existence of the Spirit go by the wayside. Fifth, at least for some countries and some cultures Cunningham seems right in arguing that, despite “the non-patriarchal intention” of traditional language for the Trinity, one should not overlook some “oppressive and distorting rhetorical effects”.

Let me end by thanking all the reviewers of both books and express my hope that some time in 2002 or 2003 I might be able to meet at least some of them personally and continue this dialogue face to face. In the meantime I want to thank Steve Davis and Dan Kendall warmly for their help in preparing this note.

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