Myk Habets (ed.)


There have been times when the _Filioque_ clause has been the object of mild humour as an affirmation which is as abstruse as it is irresolvable. This new collection edited by Myk Habets is therefore successful on a number of fronts and provides a useful benchmark since 1981 when Lukas Vischer edited _Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ: Ecumenical Reflections on the Filioque Controversy_ (Faith and Order Paper, no. 103; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981). It claims to identify four developments in the discussion since then. First, since 1981 there have been small but significant steps in Roman Catholic – Orthodox engagement towards removing the _Filioque_ as an obstacle to full communion. Today it is widely accepted that rightly understood, the _Filioque_ does not imply that there are two ultimate sources of the Spirit within the Godhead. Second, despite a contemporary ‘ecumenical winter’, it appears that Free Church and Pentecostal theologians are showing signs of interest in the issues behind this long-standing dispute. Third, there has been a renascence of Trinitarian theology in the last four decades of the twentieth century, particularly with the retrieval of the late patristic doctrine of _perichoresis_. And fourth, there is today a focus on ‘receptive ecumenism’ which seeks to identify the distinctive gifts which each tradition has to offer and which each could receive from the other with integrity.

The essays are grouped in three sections: Part 1 considers the historic formulation of the doctrine and the controversy over the Western insertion of the _Filioque_ into the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed. Part 2 considers a range of contemporary theological accounts trying to make sense of what is at stake with the _Filioque_. And Part 3 opens up new perspectives on the procession of the Holy Spirit. The essays, as might be expected, are of varying success both in themselves and as contributing to the project set by the volume. The historical ones are good and tell a familiar enough story, so there is little point in summarizing them. Other essays are more striking and some common themes emerge.

The deeply rooted Western fear of Arianism and belief that without the _Filioque_ there is a risk of some kind of subordination of the Son is recognised. So too is the unfortunate language of ‘cause’ utilized by Basil. This is, I think rightly, understood as the ultimate root of the _Filioque_ dispute. As Thomas F. Torrance noted, the _Filioque_ is an unsuccessful attempt to secure what the _homoousion_ (rightfully understood) successfully accomplishes. Paul Molnar,
dwelling mainly on Barth and T. F. Torrance, provides an outstanding paper which is the theological cornerstone of the collection.

As the main architect of the ‘Agreed Statement on the Holy Trinity’ between the Orthodox Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1991, Torrance maintained that both sides could affirm that the Spirit proceeds ‘from the Father through the Son’ and ‘from the Father and the Son’ so long as the full equality of the three persons in the one being of God is maintained. However, he argued that one could only accept both these statements (that is, the modern resolution of the Filioque as a problem) if they were not understood to mean (1) ‘that the Monarchy is limited to the Father’ – something which both the Western and Eastern Churches have held in their different ways; and (2) ‘that there is a distinction between the underived Deity of the Father and the derived Deity of the Son and the Spirit’. As long as the monarchy of God is understood as lodged within the perichoretic relations of the persons there can be no idea of two ultimate principles as the source of the Spirit. Torrance liked to think that if only the Western Church had followed Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus and Cyril of Alexandria, instead of Augustine (and Basil), an implied subordinationism in the Trinitarian relations could have been avoided and the entire issue leading to the Filioque might have been avoided.

Molnar interestingly relates these perceptions to the perspective of Karl Barth whom Torrance suspected of having an element of ‘subordinationism’ in his account of the Trinity. Thus, Torrance was uncomfortable with the way Barth in Church Dogmatics I.1 distinguished between God the Reconciler and God the Creator, speaking of the Father/Son relation in terms of superordination and subordination. He did not believe that Barth sufficiently clearly and consistently indicated that the subordination of Jesus the incarnate Son, the Reconciler, to the Father is an act of economic condescension for our sake and not a subordination within the Father/Son relation. As Torrance put it, ‘the subjection of Christ to the Father in his incarnate economy as the suffering and obedient Servant cannot be read back into the eternal hypostatic relations and distinctions subsisting in the Holy Trinity’ (Molnar, p. 29).

Following Torrance, Molnar argues that any confounding of the order of the persons within the immanent Trinity with their co-equal being will necessarily result in some form of subordinationism and opens the door for a perceived need for the Filioque. Torrance claims that this would never have happened if the full co-equality of the persons of the Trinity were upheld in the strong Athanasian sense. The mistake is inadvertently to read back elements of the economy into the immanent Trinity. Molnar notes that while this may seem like a minor point, there are wide ranging implications: it risks making God’s eternal being and action dependent on God’s relations with the world and just