Robert J. Wozniak and Giulio Maspero (eds.)


The story of the doctrine of the Trinity in modernity has become familiar. After Schleiermacher, it was largely regarded as irrelevant. Yet, since the mid-twentieth century, interest in it can hardly be contained. Barth began the *Church Dogmatics* with it; Rahner declared that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. The Trinity as a social model was proposed. LaCugna and Pannenberg saw in it a model for inter-related personhood and human community; Moltmann saw political relevance to it. Relatedly, Eastern theologians argued that Augustine had done damage in the West by concentrating on the unity of God, instead of on the three persons as the Cappadocians did, who could then fix the problems. But with all this interest, and with all these claims about the Trinity, there are a lot of very big and very important issues to be discussed, all the more so as many of these claims have become thoughtless theological cliches.

For anyone who is seriously interested in these questions this volume is a necessary acquisition. A set of twenty essays by eminent scholars, European and American, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox—it goes far beyond a loose unfocused collection; it is closer to an encyclopedia of the issues that surround contemporary Trinitarian theology. Its method is to use historical theology to delve into these issues, not only with respect to questions about, say, what thinkers in the Nicene period were actually talking about, but also with respect to the _Wirkungsgeschichte_ of the doctrine. Thus the essays have been solicited for and collected into five sections: historical perspectives, modern analytical perspectives, new readings of the Trinity, anthropological paradigms, and new systematic perspectives.

What is covered here is essential and deep. The book is specifically concerned with the sorts of issues that are directly related to contemporary debates, and most notably ones that have been swirling around the so-called “social Trinity.” The essays are not intended to be adversarial. Each contributor is a model of scholarly fairness, even when deeply associated with one of the alternatives. Thus what actually constitutes a person, divine or human, and how that has been historically understood, takes up the concerns of many essays (Perez; Oster; Greshake); what historical figures such as Augustine and his descendents (L. Ayres; R. Cross; S. Powell) or the Cappadocians (G. Maspero; L. Mateo-Seco) said, does too. There is also an examination of where exactly some of the notions that are shaping the current debates themselves have come
from, since, as it begins to become clear, many do not actually come from anything like the original debates that gave us the doctrine of the Trinity. Additionally, there is a very careful examination of the positive contributions—as well as the limitations—of the dictum “the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity” (P.G. Renczes), and of Barth’s original suggestions (B. McCormack). At the end, there is a lot of very helpful ground clearing, and clearing away of cliches.

While the treatment is balanced and thorough, though, it does start to become clear after such extensive historical canvassing—at least to this reviewer—that there are numerous serious and enduring problems with the social doctrine of the Trinity. In an essay that is a model of concise logic and clarity—and that has the effect of summarizing crucial points from many of the previous essays—Kathryn Tanner argues that the social model assumes far too small a gap between the human and divine when it is in fact immense. LaCugna and Pannenberg argued that the Trinity needed to be seen as three persons, perichoretically intertwined, and that in their love for each other there is a model for human communities. But this chiefly works if “person” in the human and divine cases are comparable. Tanner argues that not only are they not easily comparable because of the great differences between the human and divine, but, it is pretty clear that what was meant by ‘person’ in the original formulations of the doctrine, is nothing like the very Hegelian, and personalist, and even romantic understanding of ‘person’ that the social Trinitarians are wedded to. Moreover, Tanner wisely points out, “turned into a recommendation for social relations, the Trinity seems unrealistic; hopelessly naive, and for that reason perhaps even politically dangerous” (381). When looking at Gisbert Greshake’s earlier contribution to the volume, a resumé of his well-known and very aggressive and long held social Trinitarianism, Tanner’s claims seem to be well borne out.

But with this said, there is also a lot of forward conceptual movement taking place here, motion that social Trinitarianism may well have aided. As Tanner, K. Hart and D. Tracy all suggest there is a spiritual understanding of the Trinity that ought to be considered in far greater depth than is normally done. It is there that the real alternative arises. Rather than setting the Trinity as a model for human relations and communities (or not), to understand the Trinity as related to human salvation and well-being, is to see the participation of human beings in the life of the Trinity, and their adoption into the actual life of the Godhead. Here the life-giving effects of the doctrine are taken seriously, as well as its actual religious role. In this regard, there may be a lot to be gained from Augustine’s (!) suggestion, that the term “person” is fatally flawed. Modern efforts to talk about things such as “gift” and “giftedness” may do far better service—something that the ancients did already have some inchoate sense of.