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BOOK REVIEW

Jason S. Sexton, ed. *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 233 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0310498124.

Jason S. Sexton, the editor of this work and the author of its opening and closing essays, is a Research Associate at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California. Contributors to the *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* attended a one-day conference at the University of St. Andrews where they presented their views and debated with their peers. The “two views” refers to the “relational” and “classical” formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. Sexton’s first essay ably situates this debate in the recent burgeoning of Christian scholarship on the Trinity in the past thirty years.

Stephen R. Holmes and Paul D. Molnar defend the classical perspective. Holmes does so from an evangelical perspective and Molnar from a Catholic perspective. The remaining essays, by Thomas H. McCall and Paul S. Fiddes, offer two quite different ways of working out a relational perspective. As in other books in the Zondervan Counterpoint series, essayists briefly respond to one another after each essay. The author of the essay in question is given the final word in order to respond to criticisms and offer clarification. The present contributors pull no punches but remain cordial; the responses are valuable in their own right.

Holmes’s essay provides a fine foundation for the debate because he takes a historical approach to the doctrine. Pointing out that anti-trinitarians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries rejected the idea of the Trinity on the basis of a philosophical understanding of “person,” he argues that social and relational Trinitarians distort the doctrine of the Trinity in a similar fashion. He moves on to debunk Theodore de Régnon’s

influential thesis that Augustine began with one God and argued for a tripersonal God and that the Cappadocian Fathers began with three persons and argued for one God. Holmes also cautions against confusing christological and trinitarian language, arguing in direct contrast to Fiddes that the gap between creator and creature is bridged by the incarnation, not triune relationships. The most contentious part of Holmes's presentation is that the "doctrine of the Trinity is necessarily and precisely useless" (47), something that even Molnar takes exception to. As McCall points out, in Jesus' prayer in John 17, he talks to the Father about their relationship prior to the incarnation (59).

Molnar's contribution is largely built on the work of Thomas F. Torrance. For Molnar, the classical doctrine of the Trinity depends on God being triune independently of his relationship with the world. Any notion of linking trinitarian relations with the relationship between God and the world is soundly rejected. Like Holmes, Molnar argues that importing modern conceptions of person (grounded as they are in human experience rather than revelation) inevitably leads to tritheism. The rest of his argument proceeds from these two central points. It is interesting that while Molnar's contribution to this work is billed as a Catholic take on the classical doctrine of the Trinity, he argues that the *filioque* is unnecessary. Since the Spirit proceeds from the *being* of the Father rather than only from his person, and "since the Father and Son have their being in and with each other," then it is impossible to conceive of the Spirit proceeding from the Father apart from the Son, rendering the *filioque* redundant. McCall's critiques are once again helpful: "it looks to me as though he is saying that *both* the Latin and Eastern traditions were wrong" (103). Molnar's deviation from Catholic tradition on this point (however justified and useful) highlights the fact that each contributor to this work has his own idiosyncratic understanding of the Trinity. Their essays do not reflect a consensus in their respective faith traditions.

In his essay, McCall sets out to "argue that the divine persons of the Trinity are really and robustly distinct, that they are fully and thus equally divine, and that there is exactly one God" (113). He adopts a relational view of the Trinity, but along with Molnar

insists that the triune nature of God is not “necessarily related to creation” (113). After carefully laying out his methodology McCall argues that the divine persons are portrayed as engaging in “I-Thou” relationships with one another in Scripture, taking into account the distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity. Next he turns to “the broad tradition of classical, catholic orthodoxy” and finds that it “sees the actions of the divine persons in both the economy of salvation and in the immanent Trinity as distinct” (123). This in place, he argues that his proposal that “the divine persons are distinct agents” is consistent with this tradition. As evidence he marshals the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father, the doctrine of the incarnation, and the mutual love between the members of the Trinity. McCall also argues for a robust monotheism in comparison to models put forth by those holding to some form of social trinitarianism.

Fiddes’s relational model views the divine persons *as* their relations with one another. By claiming that the persons “are *movements* of life and love that have some resemblance to the relationships that we recognize between finite persons” (159–60, emphasis in original), he aims to get at the analogy social trinitarians make between divine and human *relationships* while side stepping their analogy between divine and human *persons in relationship*. While he does not claim that tradition provides direct support for his model, he argues that it satisfies both tradition and the testimony of Scripture. Anticipating critiques based on the natural assumption that relationships require agents, Fiddes appeals to the apophasis of God. He buttresses this position by pointing out that his model avoids the postmodern critique that perceiving God as a controlling agent validates some in their own attempts to dominate the world around them. In his model, Christ and the Spirit do not “link a remote God with the world” but rather bring the world into “the flowing movement between the Father and the Son in the ever-surprising newness of the Spirit” (182).

Sexton brings the book to a close with a concise summary of each perspective and reflections on the Trinity in the evangelical

tradition. This work also contains a brief but helpful glossary of technical terms, and subject and author indexes.

The title of the work is a little misleading; Holmes and Molnar (in spite of disagreeing on a few points) essentially share the same view, but McCall and Fiddes are certainly quite far apart in their conceptions of the relational Trinity. Furthermore, the nuanced and selective ways in which each of the contributors expresses his formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity at times reflects his personal views rather than the position of a certain tradition or developed school of thought. Yet there is substantive agreement on key elements in the doctrine. One point of agreement highlights a lacuna in this work: all censure social trinitarianism. This book could have been made even more useful by including a proponent of this perspective among the contributors. These caveats aside, *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* succeeds admirably as an introduction to the current debate in evangelicalism on the Trinity and as an excellent resource for further research. It will be useful to advanced students, researchers, and anyone with a good prior understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

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