



Hasker, William.

Metaphysics & the Tri-Personal God

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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An appeal to mystery has always been a mainstay in trinitarian theology. Whether attempting to describe God apophatically or cataphatically, the Christian tradition has always ultimately been forced to throw up its hands and say, “I just don’t know...” It’s not that Christians don’t know *that* God is Trinity—we know it by revelation—it’s just that we don’t know *how* God is Trinity. I believe that Philip Ryken and Michael LeFebvre got it right when they noted that our problem isn’t so much logical as it is analogical. God is unique; there’s nothing like God in existence for us to compare him to and get a completely accurate picture. And yet we wrestle with the *seeming* logical incoherence of the Trinity all the time.

It’s interesting to note that many who have tried to solve the alleged problem of the Trinity throughout history have either abandoned the faith when they couldn’t or have fallen into one heresy or another when they thought that they had (see the first chapter of James Anderson’s *Paradox in Christian Theology* for examples). The last few decades have seen philosophers of religion working in the analytic tradition turn their attention to this matter while coming up with some very different conclusions. Perhaps the most refreshing thing about some of this work is the desire and attempt to adequately account for God’s revelation in Scripture while seeking to maintain Christian tradition and simultaneously providing a rigorous philosophically coherent doctrine of the Trinity.

William Hasker, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Huntington University in Indiana, offers up *Metaphysics & the Tri-Personal God* (hereafter *MTG*) as “the first full-length study of the doctrine of the Trinity from the standpoint of analytic philosophical theology” (back cover). One might be tempted to challenge this claim in light of Thomas H. McCall’s *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?*, but in point of fact, McCall’s work turns out to be much more survey and prospect than a full-length study in its own right. In this sense Hasker is something of a trendsetter, elaborating on subject matter that has only really appeared up until this point in journal articles and anthologies.

MTG is divided into three parts of near equal proportion. The first part discusses “Trinitarian Foundations” and focuses on early Patristic trinitarian theology with an emphasis on the work of Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. The second part, “Surveying the Options,” turns to an explanation and brief examination of the trinitarian theologies of modern systematic (Barth, Rahner, Moltmann, and Zizioulas) and analytic (Leftow, Van Inwagen, Brower & Rea, Craig, Swinburne, and Yandell) theologians. The third and final part, “Trinitarian Construction,” finds Hasker mounting a case for his version of social trinitarianism, which he believes to be faithful to both Scripture and the Patristic tradition.

Hasker is not among those who believe that the word “person” in reference to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a mere placeholder, i.e., something to say rather than say nothing at all (à la Augustine). He believes that the same (or at least a very similar) concept of personhood that we apply to human beings is applicable to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is, each is a “distinct center of knowledge, will, love, and action” (22, 255-56). Where many social theories break down at precisely this point Hasker grounds the perichoretic unity of the three persons in their sharing a “single trope of deity” (a concept appropriated from anti-social trinitarian Brian Leftow), which he explains by an appeal to the metaphysical notion of constitution (i.e., each person is constituted by the divine nature without being identical to it).

Throughout the course of Hasker’s descriptive and constructive tasks he repudiates the classical doctrine of divine simplicity while defending the classical doctrines of the Son and Spirit’s eternal generation/procession. This seems to be trademark of Hasker’s work in this volume. At every point we find a theologian who is seeking to be faithful to the tradition (so far as he understands it) but who isn’t content to stay stuck in a mode of thinking that was adequate for fourth century thinkers but is considered by many to be outmoded for today’s philosophers and theologians (some might call this chronological snobbery).

There are a few things about *MTG* that I liked very much. First I have to readily admit that Hasker's version of social trinitarianism—an elegant fusing of various theories taken from his peers in the field along with some fresh insights—is perhaps the most palatable version on file. His use of Leftow's "single trope of deity" is a helpful way of looking at the divine being without falling into the modalism inherent in Leftow's own proposals. I'm also partial to the notion of "constitution" although I'm persuaded that the impure version of relative identity that Rea & Brower argue for is stronger than Hasker would have us think.

I also appreciate Hasker's writing style, which for the most part is easy to understand and to the point. At times he can get a bit technical but the interaction with his dialogue partners requires it. His critiques of Craig & Swinburne are especially poignant and to be considered carefully by those holding to similar social theories. In the end I'm still unconvinced that Hasker's accounts of constitution, perichoresis, and a single trope of deity do the heavy metaphysical lifting required to elevate social theories of the Trinity above the appearance of tritheism but his is the best attempt to overcome that obstacle that I've seen to date.

Not everything that Hasker does and argues in *MTG* is helpful though. On the minor end of the spectrum is the brief attention given to debunking divine simplicity (55-61). Hasker's case feels like an introduction to an argument rather than a developed argument in and of itself. A bit more troubling is his tendentious (and anachronistic) reading of the Fathers. Hasker has an odd way of arguing that if they didn't explicitly condemn social trinitarianism then that means they were not anti-social trinitarians, and if not anti-social, then pro-social (e.g., 44-45 cf. 49). Unfortunately there's no sustained interaction with the likes of Stephen Holmes, Karen Kilby, or Sarah Coakley who all argue against social trinitarianism in the Fathers.

Likewise, Hasker's reading of Gregory of Nyssa leaves something to be desired. While he is correct in arguing that Gregory affirmed three persons in the Trinity, Gregory's understanding of the divine persons was not what Hasker proposes. Remember, Hasker tells us that each divine person is a "distinct center of knowledge, will, love, and action," and yet Gregory says that "the will of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is one" (*NPNF2* 5.132); and that "there is no delay, existent or conceived, in the motion of the Divine will from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit" (*NPNF2* 5.335). Likewise, Nyssa focused heavily on the one divine action of the three divine persons (see Giulio Maspero, "Unity of Action" in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 771-72).

There's also the issue of Hasker's use of "split brain" and "multiple personality" studies in psychology as an argument for the viability of multiple persons within God (231-37). To start, the split brain cases cited show the two hemispheres of the brain operating independently, but not simultaneously; features that both fail to account for the personal activity that we find in the Trinity. Concerning multiple personality, Hasker's case studies suggest multiple consciousnesses that do operate independently, but I'm afraid that they don't necessarily yield multiple *human* consciousnesses. It's entirely possible that such cases are evidence of demon possession (see Mark 5:1-20), a possibility that's not even mentioned let alone explored.

But one wonders why (or how) exactly Hasker believed that even if he were able to convincingly show "multiple centers of consciousness, supported by a single instance or trope of humanness" (237) that his "trinitarian possibility postulate," which says, "It is possible for a single concrete divine nature—a single trope of deity—to support simultaneously three distinct lives, the lives belonging to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit" (228) would be true. It seems backwards to reason from the creature to the Creator, and yet this is precisely the heart of Hasker's case throughout. What we can say about God is determined by what we can say about humans.

And this is why, in the end, I believe that Hasker has failed to make his case (although I'd highly recommend interested readers to judge for themselves whether this is so). There's little reference to Scripture in this volume and yet it is precisely in God's revelation through Scripture that we find the bedrock of trinitarian theology. What we can confidently say about God is constrained by exegesis and it is at the exegetical level that we are forced, in the end, to appeal to mystery. We just can't know more than God has revealed. Hasker's conception of the Trinity ends up looking all too familiar and thus removes God's uniqueness. I can appreciate the desire to solve the mystery, but I pity the man who thinks he has.