



McCall, Thomas H.

Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?: Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?: Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology (hereafter *WTWM*) is Thomas H. McCall's (assistant professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) attempt to bridge the gap between analytic philosophers and systematic theologians. He does so by examining the conversations that are occurring amongst members of each discipline and then trying to bring them into conversation with one another.

The book is divided into three sections:

1. Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?
2. The Kingdom of the Trinity
3. The Future of Trinitarian Theology

In section one (chapters 1-3) McCall introduces the reader to the discussions and debates between philosophical theologians working in the analytic tradition on the Trinity. Chapter one offers up summaries of social trinitarianism, i.e., the Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct centers of consciousness who share a generic divine essence but are closely enough related in their identity as the one God that monotheism is not violated; relative trinitarianism, i.e., “the Father, Son, and Spirit are *distinct persons* but they are the *same God*” (41) of which there are “pure” and “impure” versions; the “impure” being preferred in what is called the “constitutional

view,” which allows for God to be “an individual (rather than a society, or a complex entity made up of parts)” (109); and Latin trinitarianism, i.e., there is one divine substance and the Father, Son, and Spirit are God “three times over” (50). Chapter two turns attention to the Bible itself and the contribution that biblical scholars have to make to the study of trinitarian theology focusing mainly on Richard Bauckham’s conception of “divine identity” in which there is nothing in the Bible that precludes Jesus from being included in the divine identity of YHWH since Second Temple Judaism was not concerned with the ontic and functional categories that later Christians would be but rather YHWH’s uniqueness as Creator and Sovereign Ruler. Chapter three returns to the focus of chapter one and offers an analysis of each respective view, noting their strengths and weaknesses. In the end McCall favors ST (such that it is safeguarded from charges of tritheism) while noting that RT has much to commend it and with some honing can become a force to be reckoned with (although the risks of modalism and antirealism are real) but LT, in McCall’s opinion, has very little to commend it and offers no substantive reasons to accept it.

In section two (chapters 4-7) McCall turns his attention to the trinitarian theologies of three prominent theologians in Robert Jenson (chapter 4), Jürgen Moltmann (ch. 5), and John Zizioulas (chapter 7), while taking a detour (in chapter 6) to discuss the allegedly recent Evangelical doctrine of “eternal functional subordination” in which Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware are his main conversation partners. McCall’s analysis of Jenson’s and Moltmann’s theologies and their respective shortcomings is impressive. For Jenson he notes how his “Identity thesis” (i.e., “God is identical to his revelatory speech and action” [129]) presents metaphysical, moral, and christological problems in that God would be dependent upon creation for his being and thus be robbed of his transcendence (and necessity); his triumph over evil would become part of his identity hence evil would be part of his identity; and his denial of Christ’s real personal preexistence and his being a “worldbound individual” fails to cohere with the biblical witness and tends toward Arianism or adoptionism. His criticisms of Moltmann are similarly poignant as he discusses Moltmann’s doctrine of perichoresis and how it either does too much in linking God with his creation so that Moltmann’s panentheism ends up being pantheism, or, it doesn’t do enough in establishing divine *triunity* because perichoresis in and of itself doesn’t *establish* divine unity but rather *presupposes* it. Moltmann’s recognition that God *can* suffer need not imply that God *must* suffer.

In chapter six McCall proposes two versions of eternal functional subordination (EFS): soft and hard. On the soft view McCall says that the claim should look something like “in this possible world it is everlastingly true that at times t --- tn the Son is incarnate and thus functionally and temporally subordinate.” The Son is functionally subordinate to the Father during the time of his incarnate and redemptive work, and this is true at all times.” (176-77) He finds nothing objectionable in such a view. The problem he finds is with the hard view that says “the Son is

functionally subordinate to the Father in all time segments in all possible worlds; there are no time segments in any possible worlds in such the Son is not subordinate to the Father.” (178) On McCall’s reading this is akin to a denial that the Father and Son are *homoousios* because the Son would *necessarily* have the property of being subordinate, which entails that the Son has it *essentially* (see 179-80). He doesn’t feel that attempts to appeal to ST help here because the Son possessing an essential property that the Father does not cannot even conform to a view of the two sharing a generic divine essence. They would in fact be *heteroousios*. He doesn’t find the biblical evidence set forth by hard EFS proponents to be decisive for the issue because at best the Bible only witnesses to a point before the incarnation where the Son obeys the Father and this cannot be taken into eternity. At worst they show only what every orthodox Christian from the beginning of time has accepted in that the Son is subordinate to the Father in his earthly life and career and that by choice.

In chapter seven McCall endorses John Zizioulas’ idea of “Being as Communion” (BAC) which states that “God has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion.” (190) The “persons have their identity only in communion, and the one divine essence is now to be identified with the communion of holy love shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (192) But McCall is not as confident in Zizioulas’ insistence on the priority of the Father in what McCall has termed the “Sovereignty-Aseity Conviction” (SAC), which states that the “ultimate ontological category which makes something really *be*, is neither an impersonal and incommunicable ‘substance,’ nor a structure of communion existing by itself or imposed by necessity, but rather the person [i.e., the Father].” (193) Wrapped up in this understanding is the absolute freedom of God the Father by which he wills God (= the Trinity) to exist. God’s existence then becomes contingent and the Father exercises a freedom that the Son and Spirit do not possess. McCall sees SAC as incompatible with BAC since it has the Father as a person *before* being in communion with the other persons of the Trinity. It also devolves into subordinationism. McCall’s corrective here is to accept BAC as Zizioulas has it and to modify SAC so that it applies to the Trinity *in toto*, and only over creation, rather than the Father alone over the Son, Spirit, and creation.

In the eighth and final chapter (which comprises the totality of the third and final section) McCall offers a brief summary of what went before and 15 concluding theses (five apiece which I summarize here for the sake of brevity) on:

1. Trinitarian Theological Method

- Trinitarian theologians should attend to important issues of theological prolegomena. (220-22)

- Trinitarian theologians should work to see the doctrine of the Trinity in the context of the broader biblical narrative. (222-24)
- Trinitarian theology should not conflate Trinitarian doctrine with sociopolitical theological agendas. (224-27)
- Trinitarian theologians should be clear about the place of “mystery.” (227-29)
- Trinitarian theology should be clear about its goals... (229-33)

2. The Threeness-Oneness Problem

- Trinitarian theology should be committed to monotheism. (233-36)
- Trinitarian theology should insist on the full divinity of the distinct persons, and it should avoid whatever might compromise the full equality and divinity of the persons. (236)
- Trinitarian theology should insist on an understanding of persons that is consistent with the NT portrayal of divine persons... (236-41)
- Trinitarian theology should reject ST theories that rely upon merely generic or perichoretic unity, RT theories that leave open the door to either modalism or antirealism, and LT. (241-43)
- Trinitarian theology should adopt either the constitution view (CT) or a modified version of ST. (243-46)

3. The God-World Relation

- Trinitarian theologians can, and should – although perhaps not always for distinctly Trinitarian reasons – hold that creation is contingent rather than necessary. (246-48)
- Trinitarian theologians should maintain that creation is the free expression of the holy love that is an essential attribute of the triune God. (248-50)
- Trinitarian theologians should affirm Jenson’s “Identification Thesis” but deny his “Identity Thesis.” (250)
- If properly nuanced, the doctrine of perichoresis can be a helpful category for understanding the divine purposes for creation (and the God-world relation more generally). (250-51)
- Trinitarian theologians should affirm that the providential and redemptive actions of the triune God should be understood in light of the triune identity and purposes for creation. (251-53)

WTWM is a fantastic contribution to trinitarian theology on a number of levels. To start, McCall has an uncanny ability that allows him to whittle down large amounts of material to the bare essentials and present summaries that are as informative as they are concise. He’s also incredibly

gifted when it comes to explaining what are rather technical and intricate debates in language that non-specialists can understand. But on top of this, his explanations and criticisms are often (but not always) on target, and past the criticisms he offers correctives and advice for ways to move the conversation forward (see this especially in the case of Moltmann in chapter 5 and Zizioulas in chapter 7). He shows a familiarity, not only with what's going on in the fields of analytic philosophy and systematic theology, but also in biblical studies and to a lesser, albeit still impressive extent, the world of patristic scholarship. The reference to the work of Richard Bauckham, James Dunn, Larry Hurtado, N. T. Wright, and others was a welcome surprise on the NT studies end; and mention of the work of Michel René Barnes, Lewis Ayres, R. P. C. Hanson, et al. was also a delight to come across. McCall is also certainly correct when he recognizes that the doctrine of the Trinity should not be conflated with sociopolitical agendas such as the complementarian-egalitarian debate or the liberation theologies proffered by theologians like Leonardo Boff and Jürgen Moltmann.

But for all its positive features there are shortcomings in this volume as well. In McCall's discussion of EFS he seems to stray away from the clarity that is evident throughout the rest of his presentation. This was the one chapter more than any other that I looked forward to because I had some lingering questions from his 2008 debate with Keith Yandell against Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware on the subject. Unfortunately my questions only multiplied and I'm more confused by his position now than I was then. For example, on McCall's reading, for the Son to possess the property of being subordinate *functionally* for all eternity ends up in a denial of *homoousios* because the Son possesses a property eternally → necessarily → essentially that the Father does not possess. But he affirms that:

properties such as "being generated," "being ingenerate," or "being spirated" belong to the distinct persons and are thus called "personal properties." These belong eternally to the divine persons, and each is possessed by only one of the divine persons. The Father, Son, and Spirit are personally distinct in their relations, and they are so eternally. (184)

He offers this admission as a means of refuting Grudem's insistence that if there is no authority-submission differentiation in God then we wouldn't know of any differences in God (a claim worth rejecting to be sure!). But by McCall's reasoning I fail to see how this doesn't run into the same problem of denying that the Father, Son, and Spirit are *homoousios*. They each possess a particular property eternally that the other does not possess. If they possess it eternally then they possess it necessarily and if necessarily then essentially on McCall's reasoning. The only way I can see around this is if McCall wants to argue that this is not the case at all times and in all possible worlds but then the threat of modalism looms in the background. For if the Father, Son, and Spirit can simply change places in different possible worlds then where is the genuine distinction? I also find McCall's argument against the biblical data to be less than convincing.

The mere ability to conceive of a God who might possibly be different in different possible worlds is not a strong argument against the God presented in Scripture. On a strictly biblical basis I'd contend that we have no reason to imagine a God whose relationship *ad intra* is any different than what we read about in Scripture and experience *ad extra* and I'm not satisfied that McCall has offered anything approaching a compelling reason why we should think this way. This is not to conflate the immanent and economic Trinity but it is to agree with McCall's endorsement of the "Identification Thesis" (in distinction from the "Identity thesis") where "God is to be identified *by* his revelatory speech and actions." (129, emphasis mine).

I also have some complaints with regard to the lack of back matter. We're given a 2½ page subject index and nothing else. A Scripture index as well as a bibliography would have been preferable although one can see why a Scripture index was not included (i.e., there isn't much reference to Scripture throughout the book past chapters 2 & 6). These criticisms aside, I can happily recommend *WTWM* to one and all.