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*The Trinity: East/West Dialogue*

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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In June 2001 members of the Society of Christian Philosophers and (some) philosophers & (mostly) theologians from the Russian Orthodox Church convened to discuss the Holy Trinity. *The Trinity: East/West Dialogue* is the published version of the papers presented at this conference. Students of Trinitarian theology would probably assume from the title that De Régnon's paradigm was firmly in place, that is, that the essays contained in this volume would be discussing so-called Eastern (beginning with the three *hypostases*) and Western (beginning with the one *ousia*) approaches to the Trinity. While many of the essays do proceed along these lines, the title rather reflects the participants, with the Russian Orthodox theologians representing the East and the SCP members representing the West.

Metropolitan Filoret of Minsk opens the volume by using an Orthodox liturgical confession to reflect on the revelation of God as Trinity. He conceives of perichoresis as a kind of “good-neighborliness,” suggesting that this “helps overcome the distinction [we see] in Hypostases as a division in the divine unity.” (8)<sup>1</sup> Richard Swinburne follows up with a paper explaining Anglo-American (or, Analytic) philosophy. He tells us that it's beholden to logical positivism and is

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<sup>1</sup> The problem with such an analogy is that it doesn't go far enough; for instance, I can have the best neighbors in the world, but as long as they live in their house(s) and not mine, they'll *just* be neighbors. Perichoresis is the interpenetration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; they all occupy the *same* divine space, for lack of a better term.

more scientific than continental philosophy. This sets the stage for the papers from the majority of the SCP members since this is the philosophical tradition in which they situate themselves. For the sake of brevity I will only briefly mention some of the standout presentations rather than summarizing every chapter.

Dale Tuggy argues that all Trinity theories (i.e., Latin Trinitarianism & Social Trinitarianism) are contradictory in that they are unintelligible, inconsistent, and a bad fit with the Bible. Appeals to mystery do nothing to resolve the seemingly irreconcilable tensions. Peter van Inwagen suggests that we jettison Leibniz's Law (the Indiscernibility of Identicals) along with the understanding of symmetry and reflexivity that comes with it and interpret the Trinity by employing a "logic of relative identity," i.e., a conception of sameness that "relativizes that sameness to a *kind*." (93) Stephen T. Davis presents a model of perichoretic monotheism that at the same time is supposed to safeguard social Trinitarianism against tritheism and Latin Trinitarianism against modalism. Peter Forrest seeks to speculate about the mystery of the Trinity by finding "some other mystery that we firmly believe in;" in this case it's human "endurance over time" (or, personal identity) that he uses as his foil for the Trinity.

On the biblical/historical side there were several helpful papers. Archimandrite Januariy offers a brief analysis of the triadology of the book of Revelation suggesting that the book is "a result of an inspired and at the same time highly reflective knowledge of God." (100) Jesus is identified with God while the Spirit's identification isn't as straightforward but comes out in the book's numerology. Hegumen Hilarion Alfeyev's paper on Gregory Nazianzen's Trinitarian teaching is arguably the most substantive contribution to this volume.<sup>2</sup> He situates Gregory's doctrine in the context of anti-Arian polemic while noting the development of Trinitarian dogma over time. An examination of Gregory's writings show that his task was as much about faithfulness to God and worship as it was about apologetics. In one of the more entertaining papers Alexei Fokin purposes to show the irreconcilable differences between Augustine's Trinitarian theology and that of the Cappadocians. He finds fault with nearly every feature of Augustine's theology such as his confusion of terms, his failure to distinguish *essence* from *hypostasis*, and his attribution of economic titles and activities to the Holy Spirit's eternal being, among other things.

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<sup>2</sup> Among other things Alfeyev helpfully notes that Gregory, and the Eastern tradition as a whole, have a dynamic understanding of the development of dogma, such that nothing *new* is being introduced, but rather we gain *fuller revelation* of the dogmas already found in some form within Scripture.

For every paper I've mentioned there is another that has gone unmentioned, some more interesting than others. One thing is clear: this conference drew together a number of thoughtful philosophers and theologians. I was struck by just how different the tenor of each essay was between the representatives of the West and those of the East. Swinburne's essay notes that the Anglo-Americans were primarily focused on philosophy while the Russians focused on the history of the doctrine and the Trinity's role in prayer and worship (see 21). If that was the goal of the conference then the mission was accomplished.

On the one hand the members of the SCP approach the Trinity, for the most part, as a problem to be solved. It's a doctrine that appears contradictory and we need to figure out just how and why it isn't (unless you're Tuggy who sees no reconciliation in sight). It would seem that the Orthodox members don't treat the Trinity as a logical conundrum that needs to be made sense out of, but rather as something to be adored and venerated, or to employ the words of Alfeyev concerning Gregory Nazianzen, "the Holy Trinity was not just a subject of theological controversy, it was primarily an object of prayerful meditation and loving devotion." (107 cf. 126) I don't mean to suggest that the majority of the SCP participants don't love the Trinity, indeed, to devote so much time and thought into showing why there is no irreconcilable contradiction in the Christian doctrine of God is evidence to the contrary. But it seems to me that the scientific nature (to use Swinburne's description) of analytic philosophy makes it come off as a bit cold.

It's difficult to suggest ways to improve a volume such as this because it's simply the collation of lectures delivered at a conference. I'd then have to suggest ways to improve the format of the conference and it's possible that the book itself doesn't reflect everything that went on at the conference. One way in which I think that this book could have been better would have been for interaction between the contributors. It's not uncommon for presenters at conferences to receive feedback from the audience or co-presenters—sometimes people are tasked specifically with writing responses—so it would have been beneficial to see how, e.g., the philosophers interacted with the theologians or even amongst themselves. The type of analysis and response I have in mind can be found in Tom McCall's helpful volume *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?* (Eerdmans, 2010).

Another suggestion would have been stricter guidelines about the length of papers. Some are as short as 5-8 pages while others are 20-plus. The book itself, as opposed to the conference from which the book came, would have definitely benefited from better copy-editing. This volume is littered with typographical errors of all sorts (punctuation, spelling, grammar). But to end on a

positive note I'd mention that the back matter contains helpful material in the form of a glossary of terms, a select bibliography, and a subject index. The eclecticism of this volume reminds me of another collection of similarly themed essays, *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (OUP, 1999). Interdisciplinary dialogue on this most important of subjects is always welcomed and the contributors and editor are to be commended for making this material available to an audience outside of the conference attendees.