



Toom, Tarmo.

Classical Trinitarian Theology: A Textbook

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Tarmo Toom is Associate Professor of Divinity at the John Leland Center for Theological Studies in Arlington, Virginia, and an Adjunct Professor at the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC. I'll be honest and admit that I had never heard of Toom or the schools at which he teaches, and I only came across this book by chance as I was searching for another on the Continuum website, but I'm glad that I have encountered his work because in short, I found it refreshing and necessary.

Toom's goal for this textbook is simple, he wants the reader to "understand classical/patristic Trinitarian theology and its formulations *before* we wander to new and equally exciting theological grounds." (1) Toom is also clear in stating a distinction that he's making between two interrelated Christological issues in the early Church: 1) the full divinity of the Son of God, and 2) the coexistence of the divine and human natures in the one person of the incarnated Son. His focus in this book is on the first point and not the second, although there will necessarily be some overlap at times. He also notes that "this book is about historical *theology* rather than about the (social) history of the first four centuries." (4) And also that he's "offered panoramic snapshots rather than exhaustive theological biographies of the thirty or so theologians" (3) that he covers throughout the book.

He asks if another textbook on the Trinity is really necessary and ultimately concludes that it is, noting that although there are "wonderful, gigantic, and scholarly monographs" and "several

first-rate studies, which consider classical Trinitarian theology as a significant part of the overall theology of the patristic church,” as well as “textbooks on the doctrine of the Trinity, which include ancient, medieval, and modern authors [that are] written for undergraduate college students and/or general readers,” the thing that “seems to be missing however, is a textbook exclusively on classical/patristic Trinitarian theology, a textbook that can be assigned for master’s students within the more general courses.” (2) This is the gap that Toom has sought to fill with this text and I for one am glad that he’s attempted to do it.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first, Toom lays out the basics and assumes that the student has no prior knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is because many students enter seminary never having studied theology in their undergrad programs. He purposely uses broad terms that he will refine and nuance accordingly in section two. This section is filled with charts and diagrams that compare Christianity with neo-Platonism, and Judaism with neo-Platonism, as well as a list of the similarities and differences. Of course the conclusion is that Christian belief shares more in common with Judaism and did not need to defer to neo-Platonism in formulating its beliefs, although there is overlap in some respects. The student is introduced to the One God and Three Persons before being treated to six negations (22-24):

1. The three persons cannot be distinguished by nature.
2. The three persons cannot be described as parts of God.
3. The three persons are not just three names of the same thing.
4. The three persons are not three successive modes of the same one God.
5. The three persons cannot be distinguished by actions (or acts) because of intercommunion.
6. The three persons cannot be distinguished by temporal priority.

Then comes the affirmations which deal mainly with the taxis of the Trinity via the causal relations. The Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Unbegottenness of particular to the Father, Begottenness is particular to the Son, and Procession is particular to the Spirit. These “modes of origination” are the means of differentiation between the persons and cannot be reversed or eliminated. He closes the section with a brief look at the *filioque* clause that the West added to the N-C Creed, and seeks to show why the misunderstanding existed in the first place. However, he does not seek to defend or refute the *filioque*.

Section two begins by listing the “cast of characters” (33-35) who were prominent in the formation of Trinitarian theology. These are broken down according to three acts (as in the acts of a play), with each act containing various individuals and groups. For example, Act I includes individual characters such as Ireneaus and Justin Martyr, and groups such as the Gnostics and

Monarchians. Toom then provides a glossary of Trinitarian terms and various insights for the meaning of these terms (36-43).

This is all followed by three charts which show the “search for Trinitarian orthodoxy and rejected extremes” in (1) the first three centuries, (2) the first half of the fourth century, and (3) the second half of the fourth century. What follows is what makes up the remainder of the second section, which is the commentary on these three charts. It’s here that Toom covers everything from the oneness of God as seen in Jewish monotheism, pagan henotheism, Monarchianism, Modalism, Christian Trinitarianism, etc. (53-59), to major early church fathers such as Novatian and Athanasius (61-91), to various councils and synods (e.g., Nicaea, Sirmium, Alexandria, etc.) (92-108), to the contribution of the Cappadocians (128-142). This is a section that is pregnant with information, and from my reading I think that Toom has done an fine job in recounting the people, places, and debates surrounding the formation of Trinitarian theology in the early Church.

The final section is merely reference material. It contains an explanation (161-163) of how Toom has set up his references in the seventeen-page table of ancient primary sources (169-186), as well as the abbreviations for scholarly resources (165-168), and finally a wonderful list of books for further study (187-192). Toom chose not to use either footnotes or end notes in this textbook, opting rather to cite his sources in parentheses in the main body of the text itself. To be honest, I rather liked this approach as it was much closer to footnotes than end notes. Unfortunately there was no subject index which I find inexcusable in a textbook.

Other than that, *Classical Trinitarian Theology* is a fantastic textbook; certainly something that is fresh in its presentation. Although the intended audience is seminary students, I’d think that this is certainly a text that could be used in undergraduate courses as well because he begins by assuming the reader has no prior knowledge of the doctrine; an approach like this seems suited for just such a setting. I have no problem in recommending this to teachers of historical theology and students of the Trinity and patristics alike.