

## The Trinity: Retrieving the Western tradition

Neil Ormerod

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In the preface, Neil Ormerod, professor of theology at the Australian Catholic University, warns us that this is “an argumentative book, perhaps even polemic at times” (9). This is one reason why it’s full of unforgettable insights. It’s also why it’s difficult to review. The arguments are detailed engagements with critics and detractors of the way in which the Trinity has been understood in the Western tradition. And it’s this detail that’s a reviewer’s burden. This is where the good stuff is; but it’s too compact to describe briefly. I’ll simply mention some of the headlines in Ormerod’s answers to its seven main questions.

What is the Western tradition of the Trinity? And why does it have to be retrieved? Ormerod believes that the Western tradition has six defining characteristics: an emphasis on the immanent Trinity; a positive view of the relationship between dogma and theology; a privileging of the psychological analogy; a commitment to intellectual asceticism, which is defined as “careful patient reasoning” (19); the doctrine of appropriations; and a high regard for philosophical categories. The modern reaction – the reaction to which Ormerod is opposed – has gone soft on the immanent Trinity; has relativised dogmatics; has changed the balance between reason and imagination in theology; and has privileged social Trinitarianism.

Who is in crisis because of Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity? There are others who qualify, but Colin Gunton’s work is a good example of how Augustine’s thinking about the Trinity has been misunderstood. Ormerod shows that Gunton got four things wrong. Augustine didn’t attach more weight to unity than to plurality in the Trinity. He didn’t find materiality a problem. He didn’t undervalue the relations between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. And the psychological analogies didn’t drive his thinking away from what was revealed in the incarnation to “the structures of human mentality” (43).

How do Augustine’s *De Trinitate* and Lonergan’s realms of meaning hang together? I think this is the best chapter in the book. Surveying attempts by Edmund Hill, by John Cavadini, by Johannes Brachtendorf and by Donald Merriell to uncover the structure of *De Trinitate*, he then employs Bernard Lonergan’s realms of meaning to create his own understanding of its structure. Briefly, Books 1-4 are illuminated by Lonergan’s realm of common sense; Books 5-7 by his realm of theory; Books 8-11 by his realm of interiority; and Books 12-15 by his realm of transcendence. Ormerod also retrieves the idea of the *filioque* by running it through these same four realms of meaning.

Is Augustine's psychological analogy of the Trinity at odds with modernity? Ormerod surveys precedents for Augustine's analogy, its place in the theology of Aquinas, and the modern litany of complaints against it. He completes the chapter with another survey, arguing that some of the ways in which this analogy is at odds with modernity "are not just accidental to our theologizing about the Trinity but may in fact be one element of the purpose of the revelation of the Trinity itself" (88). The analogy puts question marks against a number of features of contemporary thought; like its linguistic turn and its anti-realism. It also rests on a number of beliefs that challenge modern ways of thinking: like its belief that knowledge of reality is impossible; that values don't have a rational foundation; and that faith can't be reasonable.

Is it possible to reappropriate the doctrine of appropriation? Ormerod does so in three steps: by giving us a brief account of its history; by demonstrating that Lonergan's four functions of meaning – the cognitive, constitutive, effective and communicative - enable us to see that "appropriation allows us to say more than can be said" (105); by consolidating this point by relating it to the Trinitarian insights of Hans Urs von Balthasar (communicative meaning and the paschal mystery); of John Zizioulas (constitutive meaning and the mystery of the Church); and of Denis Edwards (effective meaning and ecological theology). This may be the most challenging chapter in the book.

What do you get when you wrestle with Rahner on the Trinity? A worry about the distinction between person and nature; worries about the *filioque* and, more generally, about the "ordering of the two processions" (133); and questions about theological method, about the goal of theology, and about how it's possible to establish "facts" in theology.

Finally, there's chapter seven. What's the future for (Trinitarian) theology? The question has to be faced because of the contemporary hermeneutics of suspicion that confronts theology and everything else that values "the cognitional value of rationality" (143). In this chapter he develops two of his ideas. One is the difference between emphasising experience and its interpretation instead of truth and its meaning. The other points to what a retrieved and modernized understanding of the Trinity could look like if it was approached through Lonergan's understanding of meaning; an understanding that explores "other functions of meaning besides the cognitive, while avoiding the dangers of myth-making" (151).

Ormerod hasn't said the last word on anything he has discussed. But he's shown that it's worth trying to retrieve Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity. And he's demonstrated the value of reading Augustine and other people through Lonergan's eyes. Most of it isn't easy going; but his book is an instructive and inspiring read.

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**Reviewer:** James Moulder is a retired teacher of philosophy who lives in Melbourne, Australia. He enjoys reviewing theology books; in particular, those by Australian theologians.

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