

## Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham

Russell L. Friedman

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**R**ussell Friedman is a professor in medieval philosophy and theology at the University of Leuven. His book goes back to a doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Iowa in 1997, as well as to four lectures he gave at the *École pratique des hautes études* in the Sorbonne in 2008.

In each of these cases, Friedman wrestles with a set of lively Trinitarian debates between 1250 and 1350. Most of the participants were Franciscans or Dominicans. And they clashed over two major issues. Why are the Father, the Son and the Spirit both distinct and identical? And is the idea of the Son as a Word or a Concept of the Father to be taken literally or metaphorically?

Friedman outlines these debate in four chapters, each of which is clearly written, convincingly argued, and rich in information.

In Chapter 1, Aristotle's philosophical logic is the framework for arguing about different ways of explaining identity and distinction. Dominicans favoured formal explanations that emphasised the way in which the Father, the Son and the Spirit are related to each other; with the Father being from none, the Son being from the Father, and the Spirit being from the Father and the Son. Franciscans favoured explanations that focused on distinctive actions and passions that identified the Father, the Son and the Spirit; with the Father being unbegotten, the Son being the only begotten of the Father, and the Spirit emanating or proceeding from both the Father and the Son.

In Chapter 2, philosophical psychology is the framework for arguing about how literally (Franciscans) or metaphorically (Dominicans) the Son is a Word or Concept of the Father. Scotus made a major contribution to this dimension of the debate by trying to create a theory of concept formation that would illuminate the sense in which the generation of the Son is from the Mind of the Father, and the procession of the Spirit is from the Will and the Love of the Father and the Son.

In Chapter 3, metaphysics is the framework for arguing about method in Trinitarian theology. Once again, Scotus has a leading part in the debate; but Ockham's nominalism begins to encourage the push towards fideism that would lead to a waning of interest in Trinitarian theology.

In Chapter 4, the framework of the debate is the loss of confidence in what reason can contribute to (Trinitarian) theology. A significant, but seldom considered contribution to the debate was made by Praepositinus (1150-1210). Although he flourished before the period that interests Friedman, he argued for it being a given that the Father, the Son and

the Spirit are and are not distinct. Therefore, they are distinct in and of themselves and not because of something else, like a relation or an emanation. His position was rejected by Henry of Ghent and others; but it encouraged the belief that it's impossible to explain the Trinitarian distinctions.

Friedman's book ends with a summary of the flashpoints in the debates between Franciscans and Dominicans. And a list of selected secondary sources is annotated to assist study of the people and issues he has discussed.

While Friedman's book is consistently excellent and informative, various readers may spend more time on some themes and theologians than others. For example, Friedman's discussion of Scotus is as good a short introduction to his philosophical psychology and philosophical logic as one can get. And the same goes for his fresh understanding of Ockham's nominalism and how it pushed him into fideism. And, of course, there are the many snapshots of less studied theologians; like Peter Auriol and Gregory of Rimini. In fact, everyone who is anyone in these hundred years of medieval Trinitarian theology gets some kind of mention.

Another way to recommend what Friedman has given us is to list some of the themes and questions that emerged during the debate. Some of them are as alive today as when they were discussed in medieval times. For example, when thinking about the Trinity, when and where should faith and reason nudge and block each other? And when are Scripture and Tradition being misused in a theological debate? There are also questions that were neglected during the debate and still do not receive the attention they deserve. For example, Walter Chatton's focus on questions of method in Trinitarian theology was as unusual then as it is now.

For all these reasons, Friedman's book stretches our minds into medieval issues, as well as into contemporary ones. The only thing it doesn't do is to be irrelevant to past and present attempts to understand the doctrine of the Trinity.

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**Reviewer:** *James Moulder is a retired business school academic and a student at Catholic Theological College in Melbourne, Australia.*

**Email:** [plato@sims.com.au](mailto:plato@sims.com.au)

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