

Reviews

THESE THREE ARE ONE: THE PRACTICE OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY by David S. Cunningham , *Blackwell Publishers*, 1998, pp 368, £50 hardback, £15.99 paperback.

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY: THE INTEGRITY OF SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY by Mark A. McIntosh , *Blackwell Publishers*, 1998, pp 246, £50 hardback, £15.00 paperback.

Edited by Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones, Blackwell Publishers got away to a remarkable start in their 'Challenges in Contemporary Theology' series with Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (reviewed last month). Whether the books will be as 'carefully coordinated' as the blurb contends remains to be seen. Pickstock's thesis that, 'outside the logic of the Mass, there can be no meaning', as John Milbank puts it, is quite difficult to connect, let alone to coordinate, with David S. Cunningham's witty and entertaining bid to liberate the doctrine of the Trinity 'from its imprisonment within the dusty confines of the history of dogma'. Despite that 'liberal'-sounding programme, he remains entirely faithful to the doctrine as developed over the centuries. Unlike many theologians a generation ago, he is not out to make it easier to swallow for those who cannot believe it in any orthodox form. On the contrary, it is the traditional doctrine, in a thoroughgoing red-blooded version, which Cunningham seeks to make more intelligible and especially more *practicable*.

Formerly at the University of St Thomas, St Paul, Minnesota, now at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Cunningham writes very accessibly, opening up his wide range of reading to us. Part One identifies the strengths and weakness of various ancient and modern treatments of the doctrine of the Trinity — more of them modern than ancient. For example, T.F. Torrance's *The Christian Doctrine of God* (1995), a patristic dossier, while listed in the helpful bibliography as lying between 'Introductory' and 'Advanced', is described as being 'not conversant with the current conversation, and not written in a very user-friendly style' — charges one certainly could not bring against Cunningham. Being up to date, Cunningham takes St Augustine more seriously, as a theologian of the Trinity, than Torrance is usually able to do ('the sweet but insidious effect of Augustinian thought in western theology', etc.) Nor is Cunningham persuaded by Colin Gunton's story that Augustine belongs with the 'devotees of the Parmenidean One'. In fact, he has some good pages on the absurdly competitive history of scapegoating in modern theology — how far back did it all go wrong — with Karl Rahner (and many in his wake) fixing on Thomas Aquinas's

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fateful split between *de deo uno* and *de deo trino*, others settling on Augustine (Torrance again: 'the Latin heresy'), the late Catherine LaCugna's making the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325!) culpable for losing sight of God as Trinity.

Part Two sets out Cunningham's own account of God as Trinity — not as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, however, since that is too gender-specific, but as Source, Wellspring and Living Water. He works in themes from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* — 'attempting to describe aspects of God's character that are present, by grace, in the development of human habits'. He brings in Bonhoeffer, Balthasar, Milbank, Bakhtin, and finally *The Brothers Karamazov*. Throughout, his familiarity with recent biblical scholarship is interwoven with his wide reading in current philosophy, literary theory and theology. Part Three examines the specific practices that Cunningham sees as exemplifying and incarnating faith in God as Trinity — peacemaking, pluralizing ('multiple voices must be heard') and persuading (non-coercive exercise of authority) — not all that surprising a list, perhaps, but freshly conceived and often ingeniously documented.

Cunningham likes alliteration; every chapter is headed by a word beginning with the letter 'p'. No doubt 'user-friendly', his approach sometimes verges on becoming irritatingly tricky. Thomas Aquinas's talk of subsistent relations is 'extremely technical', we are told, so we turn to the analogy of pregnancy — fine; but 'the problem with all such analogies, to put it bluntly, is that pregnancies usually come to an end' — fair enough; but the next paragraph opens: 'My wife would want me to emphasize that, in general terms, this is most certainly not a problem' — a neat joke in a lecture (perhaps) but only one of the many asides dispersed throughout the book which the copy editor should have encouraged the author to eliminate. 'Bring scuba gear', we are advised, as we try to understand the idea of internal divine relations. God's decision to produce the world is compared to that of a gardener who will stay with a project through thick and thin — "through hell and high water" as my grand father used to say (a Kansas wheat-farmer is, after all, a gardener of sorts'. No doubt Cunningham is out to kill off the idea that the doctrine of the Trinity is 'esoteric and irrelevant'. If his persuasive rhetoric sometimes comes between him and the staid reader, there is no question that this is a highly enjoyable and illuminating addition to the wave of recent reaffirmations of the centrality of the doctrine in Christian theology and life.

The third book in the series so far certainly fits in with Cunningham's. Mark A. McIntosh teaches at Loyola University of Chicago, and is often faced by students who tell him that while they are 'not religious, at least not in any institutional sense', they 'have a strong commitment to spirituality'. He opens with the arrest of Edith Stein and her sister Rosa on 2 August 1942. Within a week they died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz. 'Come, Rosa', Edith reportedly said, to strengthen her deeply distressed sister and no doubt the other nuns, 'we're going for our people'. She had already offered herself as 'a sacrifice of atonement'

for peace and for the deliverance of her fellow Jews. That afternoon she had been on a book on St John of the Cross; she had just reached his death and was about to discuss his theology of the soul's abandonment into the darkness of the divine presence. Stein, in her reading and writing, and in her arrest and death, is a symbol of the integration of spirituality and theology. Building on the work of such writers as Michel de Certeau, Andrew Louth, Bernard McGinn, Simon Tugwell, Denys Turner and Rowan Williams, the author spends little time retracing the effects of the much deplored split between theology and spirituality, preferring rather to suggest ways of overcoming it.

Chapter 2 traces the mystical element in Christian doctrine from Paul and John through Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor and their ecclesial/communal understanding of the interior life to the focus in the Middle Ages on the affective experience of the individual. Chapter 3 considers two contrasting approaches to overcoming the split between academic theology and personal sanctity, first Karl Rahner's mystagogy of workaday Christian faith, then Hans Urs von Balthasar's insistence on mission through participation in Christ's mission. Allowing a certain tension in Rahner's work, McIntosh nevertheless denies that he merely founds theology on Kantian transcendental anthropology. On the contrary, in his essays on St Teresa of Avila, the *incomprehensibilitas Dei* in St Thomas Aquinas, and the concept of mystery in Catholic theology, Rahner brings out the Trinitarian ground of all transcendental experience. The two theologies of the mystical life complement one another, McIntosh holds, refusing to play the game of favouring one over the other. Chapter 4 continues the return from 'mysticism' as the individual's allegedly ineffable private experience to 'mystical theology' in terms of the public ecclesial preconditions of the individual believer's being shaped by divine grace. Chapter 5, on the doctrine of God as Trinity, considers God's participation in our lives as inseparable from God's own life of relational participation. Chapter 6, relying a good deal on Herbert McCabe's response to the 'myth of God incarnate' people, proposes Christian spirituality as a 'resource for exploring in an intelligible way the notion that in this human being Jesus of Nazareth, one encounters not a truth or word about God but the actual personal presence of the eternal Word of God – who does not choose to be God apart from being human'. In short, 'the doctrine of the Incarnation is not a kind of centuries-long theological blunder' — as Christian mystical traditions help to show. Finally, in chapter 7, returning us to Edith Stein, among others, McIntosh sketches how, with a post-modern conception of the relationality of the self, it becomes possible to retrieve a sense of human selfhood as 'constituted by its basis in the infinite self-giving of the trinitarian life'.

These two books certainly complement each other. McIntosh cites Cunningham once; but, whether or not they were aware of one another's work in progress, they speak in much the same style of confident orthodoxy, bringing the central doctrine of Christian theology to the fore,

very practically and imaginatively, in contributions to a series which should certainly challenge readers in theology departments but also anyone, believer or otherwise, who would like to know something about the best that is happening in American theology today.

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS. AN INTRODUCTION: edited by Bernard Hoose, Cassell, London, 1998, xiv + 337pp, Hb. £55, Pb. £20.

As Vincent MacNamara says in his contribution to this book 'there are different levels of moral discourse' (p.158). This is one of the difficulties facing a project such as this, which seeks to offer an introduction to the various elements of Christian ethics. The solution chosen here is to provide two parts, the first on 'Basic Christian ethics', the second on 'Applied ethics', this latter being further sub-divided into 'social ethics', 'interpersonal and sexual ethics' and 'medical ethics'. But even within these two parts the various levels of discourse inevitably imply further distinctions.

A second difficulty in introducing people to moral theology is deciding where to begin. Half of Part One's ten chapters deal with the moral agent and this, I think, is a good place to begin (although the chapters I refer to are scattered throughout Part One). So there are very good chapters on virtue ethics (James F. Keenan), the human person (Joseph Selling), conscience (Richard M. Gula), natural law (Gerard J. Hughes) and feminist ethics (Susan F. Parsons). Parsons summarises well the concerns which have encouraged many to study virtue ethics whether in reaction to what is considered 'patriarchal morality' or because of more general doubts about the kind of thing the moral agent becomes in modern thought. Specifically the individualism of much moral thinking needs to be corrected by a relational or social view of the human person, modern notions of rationality need to be corrected by a renewed appreciation of the holistic character of being human (body, feelings), and the concern with autonomous control needs to be calmed somehow, leaving room for vulnerability and compassion.

Part One begins in fact with a contribution by Tom Deidun on the Bible and Christian ethics. There is the usual 'dark night of the soul' for the non-professional exegete as all one's dearest prejudices about the connection between Scripture and Christian morality are taken away. Normative teaching? Perhaps not. Ideals? Well, which are you going to choose. The programme of Jesus' life and teaching perhaps? Sounds promising, but will we not end up trimming Jesus and his teaching to suit our current concerns? Paul's letters surely give us direction? Yes, but so many of them, like all the texts of Scripture are intended for particular audiences and come from social and cultural situations which are not ours. And so on.

Instead Deidun recommends a 'non-method' which will be free, unpredictable, versatile and imaginative, 'a relaxed and imaginative