

Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister, eds.
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Theology*.
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This collection of essays constitutes the most recent volume in the distinguished series, Cambridge Companions to Religion, all until now devoted to major topics and key figures in theology and religious studies. Thus, there have been volumes that explore, among other subjects, biblical interpretation, Christian ethics, liberation theology, feminist theology, postmodern theology; medieval and modern Judaism, and the Qur'an; and volumes devoted to, among other figures, Jesus, St. Paul, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Rahner, Mohammed, and the Jesuits. It is a very ecumenical series. Internationally recognized scholars were commissioned to write (pretty much) free-standing essays on their area of expertise within (I assume) fairly firm space constraints. The same is true of this volume (see 66, 201). There are sixteen essays, all by very distinguished scholars and all about fifteen pages in length. They are of uniformly high quality: learned, but well-written and accessible, and well worth reading.

I've already hinted that this volume marks a departure from earlier ones in that it explicitly addresses issues in philosophical theology, rather than the problems of understanding religious traditions and the major figures in them, significant though they are. So what is Christian philosophical theology? Neither the editors nor the contributors ever try to say in any very precise way, so I offer the following (rough) definition: Christian philosophical theology is philosophical reflection on Christian theological doctrines and practices. This looks obvious and trivial, but it isn't, since a lot of Christian beliefs are by no means trivial *or* obvious (the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus, e.g.), and so should be subject to critical scrutiny. The essays in *Christian Philosophical Theology* do that. Regardless of the religious beliefs (or lack thereof) of their authors, they are not exercises in Christian apologetics. The goal is to present, in a reasonably dispassionate and objective way, the arguments for and against different ways of thinking about central Christian beliefs, not to gain converts for the Christian cause (xiii-xiv).

In this, I think the editors have, for the most part, succeeded admirably. The work is divided into two parts. Part 1 discusses the nature of God, Part 2 the relation of God to His creation. Part 1 has chapters on the Trinity and on (alleged) divine properties like simplicity, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity, and perfect goodness. Part 2 has chapters on the Incarnation and the Resurrection, on sin, atonement, and salvation, on the problem of evil, on the Church and religious rites, on miracles and the power of prayer, and on heaven and hell. I will comment on a couple of the essays below.

First, however, allow me to mention several noteworthy omissions and (in this connection) comment on the orientation of the collection. There is, to begin with, no

essay devoted to traditional arguments for the existence of God, and the question of whether God exists rarely gets mentioned. This is odd, since existence arguments are a standard part of traditional philosophical theology and since the chapter on the problem of evil, where the question does get mentioned (168-9), is a pretty standard survey of traditional explanations (by, e.g., Augustine and Irenaeus). Second, there is no essay on creation, either original (*creatio originans*) or ongoing (*creation continua*). Indeed, there is not even an index entry for ‘creation’; and the only discussion of God’s Providence is in a chapter that questions whether it can be reconciled with God’s timelessness, complete foreknowledge, and libertarian human freedom (see Ch. 6, esp. 81, 85). Here I note that the authors all seem to work in a fairly narrow analytical mode: *If* God exists, and *if* God is simple, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient..., then what does that mean and what follows from it? (e.g., 153-5). And this mode is one that presupposes a classical theism in which God is imagined to have all the attributes of a ‘maximally perfect being’ (e.g., 46, 96). There are a lot of references to people who defend that view (see, e.g., the index citations to Richard Swinburne, 264, and the references to his works that are often cited, 256), but there are next to no references to authors (Charles Hartshorne, e.g.) who argue a neo-classical position (53-4), only a passing one to process theology in the chapter on prayer (222-3), and none at all to authors like John Haught who propose and defend a philosophically oriented Christian theology of evolution, both cosmological and biological. It’s as if the volume’s authors don’t think (maybe don’t even realize) that there are significant philosophical questions to address about non-classical forms of Christian theism (see, e.g., Daniel A. Dombrowski, *Analytic Theism, Hartshorne, and the Concept of God*, SUNY 1996). Finally, there is no chapter on Christian eschatology and no philosophical discussion of the eschaton (or any index entry to either), except for a brief injunction by one author that Christians should not pay too much attention to what contemporary cosmology says, since in the general resurrection of humans, as in the resurrection of Jesus, God doesn’t have to pay attention to the laws of physics (122-3).

These reservations aside, I return to what I said earlier: this is a fine collection of essays, well worth reading. What to comment on in a brief review? I found myself wanting to comment on far too much. There is a very rich discussion of the celebration of the Eucharist in an essay on religious rites (194-9), which especially interested me since I am Catholic. There is an equally interesting discussion of petitionary and intercessory prayer (217-32) in the splendid chapter on prayer, whose central question is ‘what is its point?’ (216). And there is another fascinating discussion of conceptions of heaven and hell in Jerry Walls’ chapter on the subject (Ch. 16). Can all humans be saved, or only just some of us? (The volume *is* anthropocentric. It never raises the general question of universal redemption, because it never explores the question of *what* the eschaton will be.) Walls is only author in the volume to commit himself to a religious position. He never says whether he thinks hell is a ‘place’ or whether it is to be ‘cut off’ from God, but he’s quite clear that hell need not be eternal damnation, since ‘only those who persist in rejecting [God’s grace] will be finally lost’ (242). For my part, I don’t think that could happen, since I don’t think that anyone in the direct presence of God could reject Him (would want to reject Him), so I don’t believe in Satan (or in fallen angels generally), notwithstanding my belief in libertarian human (and angelic) free will.

Instead of commenting further on these issues, however, allow me to say something about the chapters on the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection. This is a part of the book where I would have liked the separate discussions to be better coordinated. Begin with the Trinity, a central doctrine of Christian belief, but also one that has historically provoked some of the most acrimonious debates. As a way of understanding the problem, consider the following:

- (a) God is one and simple.
- (b) The Godhead is triune.
- (c) The members of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are equal in stature. None predominates over the others; none is subordinate to the others.
- (d) The Son 'proceeds from' (or is 'begotten' from) the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

A major problem in trying to interpret the doctrine of the Trinity is how to avoid the (apparent) contradictions in (a)-(d). There are heresies on all sides. Some emphasize the unity (the oneness) of God by minimizing or ignoring the distinctness of the members of the Godhead; others do the opposite, emphasizing the distinctness of the members of the Trinity, while seemingly ignoring the unity and simplicity of God. A standard way of avoiding the conflict, which goes back to St. Augustine, is to say that the Godhead is comprised of three persons in one substance (or nature or essence), and that the three divine persons participate fully and equally in the single divine nature. Clearly, though, these are not ordinary human persons. So how are they related? Scripture is not very helpful here. Some passages suggest that, in fact, the Son *is* subordinate to the Father (e.g., Col.1: 15-20), and many that do seem to affirm equality (e.g., Mark 1:9-11; Matt. 3:16-17, 28:19; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34; 1 Cor.2 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14) don't explain their relatedness. One suggestion (which again goes back at least to Augustine) is that the Godhead is a community that works together to achieve mutually shared aims. It's an intimate fellowship, although certainly a unique one, which doesn't have any fully human analogue. The 'societal' understanding of the Godhead was prominent in the writings of the theologian Jürgen Moltmann (12-13) and has been defended more recently by recent scholars who view the Trinity as 'a divine, transcendent society or community of three fully personal and divine entities,' who are united in sharing the divine essence and by 'their joint redemptive purpose, revelation, and work' (13). On this view, each person is distinct, but not independent or separate. The persons of the Trinity eternally work together to achieve a common end. This is certainly not what human communities usually do; but it does provide a model for human interaction. If part of the *imago Dei* claim of Christian theology is that humans are meant to live in community, since the Godhead itself is a community, then this a powerful argument for harmonious co-operation and mutual support.

In the Incarnation, according to Christian belief, God sends His Son to become human in order, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, to free us from our sins and bring us to life eternal. Is this demeaning to God? Has God diminished Himself in seeking to save us? This is the central question of the chapter in the volume on the Incarnation (95). Katherin Rogers argues, via a clever but fanciful computer-games

analogy, that He did not; but she fails to understand the theology. To begin with, the Father sends his son as act of love, which does reveal divine vulnerability (John 3: 16-17). Second, it is the Son who becomes human, not the Father, as she seems to think (105). And, third, the Son *does* humble Himself in becoming human. He empties Himself (Phil. 2: 5-9). Rogers doesn't pay any attention to *kenotic* (self-emptying) passages in Scripture, because she thinks that they are incompatible with a 'perfect being' theology (98-9, 105). This is odd, since she also seems to accept the idea that while Christ as the divine Son is omniscient, Christ as the human Jesus is not (96). If that's the case, then why not extend it to Christ's other abilities? *Qua* human in the person of Jesus, Christ dies on a cross, and cannot prevent it; *qua* Son of God, Christ is still present in the world, and wouldn't allow it to evaporate, as Rogers imagines it would on a kenotic understanding (98-9).

The Resurrection is as central to Christian belief as the Incarnation. Christians affirm that Christ Jesus was raised from the dead with the promise that we will be also. What does that mean for Christ and what does it mean for us? Stephen Davis, the author of the essay on the Resurrection, doesn't seem to have any coherent idea of what it could mean for Christ. Is the man Jesus resurrected to sit alongside Christ the Son, or does Jesus as Christ return to the Godhead where He is again fully the Son of God? It's hard to know, since Davis nowhere addresses the *kenosis* question. To put the question concretely: What do Christians actually celebrate at Easter, the elevation of Jesus to a sort of superhuman status, or the restoration of Christ as the Son of God? Was Jesus raised *as* the incarnate Son of God? (See the discussion of Swinburne's book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 112-14.) If it's probably impossible for philosophical theology to explain how the 'Godman' can be both divine and fully human in the Incarnation, it's equally difficult for philosophical theology to explain what happened to the resurrected Jesus and how he is related to the Son from whom he proceeded. But Davis has nothing to say about any of that. On the 'general resurrection' (Acts 24:15), he has a lot to say, but only by way of raising various questions. Does my resurrection require that I be reunited with the same post-mortum body? Does the resurrected body have to be composed of *exactly* the same stuff? In any case, what kind of a body would this be? A physical one, a 'glorified' and improved one (I Cor. 15)? Does a part of me or an attenuated me (my soul) survive bodily death, which must be reunited with *my* body to again be fully me, as Aquinas thought (117); or do I cease to exist altogether at death, with resurrection being a *de novo* creation? (118) Davis explores the options but does not suggest any answers, except to say that the general resurrection (whatever it is) will likely occur at the eschaton (119)—which is another reason that it would have been useful to have an essay on Christian eschatology.

Despite these and earlier reservations, however, I recommend this volume of essays as serious contemporary discussions of issues that will be of interest to any reflective, philosophically-minded Christian and perhaps to some non-Christians as well.

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