

Though a valuable introduction for the beginning student, this is not a dispassionate survey. Marsh traces trinitarian doctrine from its biblical underpinnings through the history of the tradition and on to the current discussions of trinitarian theology as refracted through contemporary thought. His agenda is clear if one first reads the final chapter, "Theology of the Trinity today". In common with many late twentieth century scholars, Marsh takes as a starting point the work of Karl Rahner, seeking rethinking of our trinitarian understanding of God to apply to all aspects of God's relationship with us. "All theology ... should display a trinitarian character. ... This is an agenda which theology as yet can scarcely be said to have perceived, much less to have applied",¹ Marsh argues. It is an agenda, nonetheless, towards which contemporary scholars such as Jürgen Moltmann, Catherine LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson, have made contributions.

As one reviewer notes², Marsh's survey of trinitarian theology is, in effect, a kind of summary of recent research. Today there is renewed understanding of the Trinity as experienced in salvation history, as well as a new and intense interest in the work of the Holy Spirit in life and worship.

Marsh's historical study concentrates on those aspects of the history of trinitarian thought which he considers have brought Western, Latin, thinking on the Trinity to the place it is in today. Thus we get a full discussion of Aquinas but nothing on the Reformers. Marsh consciously omits consideration of the Eastern Christian tradition and of the distinctions between East and West. That said, the book covers a large scope. Marsh provides an insightful summary of the roots of the Western tradition and the struggles of theologians to find language to explain a central mystery of Christian faith.

Following a sketch of Old Testament foundations, Marsh delineates New Testament stimulus to trinitarian thought. (If Jesus saves human beings from sin, then in some way, Jesus must be God. For only God can save. New Testament testimony asserts that Jesus is God, while simultaneously affirming the deity of the Father and Holy Spirit.) He devotes a chapter to the work of the early apologists, and later pre-Nicene theologians. The "Trinitarian Controversy", centred on the Councils of Nicea

¹ p.173

² Cunningham, Lawrence S. [Book review] *Commonweal* 122(10):38f, 19 May 1999

and Constantinople, is treated fully from historical and theological perspectives. The Latin tradition is introduced through Augustine, leading to an overview of Aquinas's trinitarian thought.

Many of the great teachers of the church have been ill served, Marsh shows, by those who come after them. What the Cappadocians took to be structure (one substance, three persons) others took to be content. The vast scope of Aquinas's writing caused much of it to be used out of context, with its nuances and subtleties unregarded.

The book ends with some discussion questions keyed to each chapter and a brief bibliography for further reading. Regrettably, there is no index.

As a student, I found Marsh instructive, and his book clearly written. I wonder whether, in addressing needs for change in trinitarian theology, Marsh seeks to influence the direction of thought of student readers - for the issues he raises are surely familiar to mature theologians.

Reading Marsh evoked a sense of frustration, not with his work, but with the thinking and events he describes. Speaking of the pre-Nicean writers, Hippolytus and Tertullian, and the dependence of their thought on Greek philosophy, Marsh observes:

since they do not question the system within which they operate, they do not question the basis of the system. As with the Apologists, the Stoic distinction is still an imprisoning straitjacket.³

(I ask myself, "How much does our philosophical frame of reference limit our ability to discern theological truth?") Origen somewhat redeemed this situation by rejecting the applicability to the Trinity of the Stoic distinction between the immanent and the expressed Logos. In the post-Nicean work of Augustine, we find another theological straitjacket. Because there was considered to be no act of God relating to humankind in which the Father or Son or Holy Spirit acts alone, it was necessary to invent the concept of appropriation in order to reconcile theology with scripture. Augustine's flaw, Marsh contends, is simply that

he has made the language of scripture and Christian faith conform to his conceptual analysis of the doctrine of the Trinity rather than approaching matters the other way round.⁴

As with Augustine, so also with the Aquinas and the scholastics; Marsh honours and sets out clearly the contributions made to trinitarian thought by these foundational writers. But he finds the thought of Augustine and the scholastics in particular so

³ p.81
⁴ p.135

deeply ingrained in Western theology that we have failed to critically consider the consequences. (Is this is more an issue for Catholics than Protestants? Again, it would have been helpful to see something of the reformers and of the Eastern tradition.) The separation of the immanent Trinity from an economic Trinity known only in one substance has been, as Rahner found, particularly damaging.

This is where I feel frustration, even despair. If Marsh's criticism is reasonable, it is incredible that so many centuries of thought should have brought us to such an unfortunate state. There is now much to do. Marsh declares that awareness of this has brought to the theology of the Trinity,

a vibrancy and a vitality to it unknown in this field since the stormy days of the fourth century. This new interest and renewal grew out of a gradual awakening to and realisation of the serious limitations which scholastic trinitarian theology involved. ... It has led to a positive renewal of this theology and a basic rethinking ...⁵

This seems to offer potential for exciting work in trinitarian theology. But we should note the lessons of the centuries, which are first, humility, and secondly, that we should take great care to give God's self-revelation in Christ, especially as found in the Scriptures, complete precedence over our own philosophies and preconceptions.

⁵ p.190