

Chad McIntosh, ed. *One God, Three Persons, Four Views: A Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Dialogue on the Doctrine of the Trinity*. Cascade Books, 2024. 293 pp. \$58.00 (hbk); \$38.00 (pbk).

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Alongside the notion of God as the creator of the material world, the doctrine of the Trinity is at the heart of traditional Christian theology. And whereas Karl Rahner once complained that the majority of the faithful in his day might as well be practical Unitarians, since then more books and articles have been written on the Trinity in the last fifty years than one could hope to read in twice as much time. Books on the Trinity published in this time are of all sorts: some academic, some popular; some expository, some exploratory; some devotional, some apologetic. Just about every important Christian theologian and philosopher of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has had something to say about the Trinity, as could be expected. But what one does not find so commonly is a book like Chad McIntosh's *One God, Three Persons, Four Views: A Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Dialogue on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, in which high-profile philosophical theologians are gathered in one place, differing conceptions of the Trinity are discussed, and in which even an explicitly non-Trinitarian perspective is also included. Here the element of debate is put at the forefront, and critical voices which would normally go ignored or excluded are given a place at the table. As a person who has written critically about the traditional doctrine of the Trinity and suffered some social costs for that reason, I welcome this development and encourage its continuation. In the case of *One God, Three Persons, Four Views*, I would say that the final product is a good one.

The four debaters are William Hasker, William Lane Craig, Beau Branson, and Dale Tuggy—names well-known to persons familiar with the landscape of analytic philosophical theology. So much is talked about in this book that it would be impossible to summarize it all both adequately and succinctly, but it may be worth mentioning a few points of general interest here. Hasker's and Craig's opening statements focus principally on the New Testament evidence to be brought in favor of the deity of Christ. Branson's places special emphasis on the exposition of the Nicene understanding of the Trinity found in authors like Gregory of Nyssa, while Tuggy argues that there are some twenty obvious facts about the New Testament which make some variety of non-Trinitarian theology more likely. Hasker and Craig conceive of God as a kind of immaterial soul (the shared essence) endowed with three sets of rational faculties (the three persons), though they disagree as to whether one ought to accept the traditional Nicene doctrine of the processions of the persons. Branson's exposition draws from finer details of Gregory Nyssen's philosophy of action about how to count actions and agents in order to address such familiar arguments as the "three gods" problem. Tuggy insists that the evidence is more suggestive of the perspective that the only true God is exactly one person, the same person whom Jesus and the New Testament call "the Father." In their responses to each other, the contributors

touch on matters of Old and New Testament exegesis, metaphysics and epistemology, and ecclesial history alike. They are all very capable debaters who have much of value to say about the problems surrounding this area of Christian theology.

There are some aspects of the book which I found less than fortunate. In the first place, Tuggy seems to be something of the elephant in the room in this debate about the Trinity. Even when he is not directly relevant, the Trinitarian contributors will mention his name, either in the body of the text or else in footnotes, as though he and his critiques were always lurking in the back of everyone's mind. From my point of view as a "heretic" myself, this could be taken as subtly suggestive of a kind of latent hostility toward the non-Trinitarian, a general unease with his mere presence in a discussion about holy mysteries, as though he were an intruder or interloper, as though he didn't belong. To illustrate this point, I note that Craig sometimes seems to be excessively polemical in his treatment of Tuggy. His choice of words to describe the consequences of his arguments for Tuggy's Unitarian position, for example, strikes me as needlessly violent. Craig says his arguments are like a "dagger in the heart of Unitarianism" (236), while Tuggy in response to Craig resembled "a deer caught in the headlights" (236). Perhaps this was to be expected, and it's likely that Tuggy does not take it personally. It's a part of the "bloodsport" of philosophy. But my opinion is that all this sort of thing is entirely out of place in what is presumably intended as a strictly academic discussion between philosopher-theologians. In this kind of context, pious zeal and religious sentiment are better left severely muted or suppressed as much as possible.

So that no one can accuse me of complaining only about the Trinitarians, I will further observe that Tuggy comes off as overconfident in his final words against Craig, whom I consider to have rejoined Tuggy's objections against his exegesis of the New Testament quite well. But I will also hasten to add that this shortcoming is not entirely Tuggy's fault, since Craig's powerful rejoinder to Tuggy comes in Craig's final statement, which Tuggy would not have seen before writing his own. Yet the end result is still that Tuggy's own final statement comes off as disproportionately confident in the strength of his own case. This may simply be an inevitable consequence of the debate-book format.

Some arguments in the book's debate I found rather unconvincing. Craig, for example, complains against Tuggy that "the NT authors did not even have a clear conception of the logical relation of numerical identity" (203). That arguments about identity factor highly in debates about the logical coherence of the Trinity is obvious to anyone familiar with the discussion. For example, if the Father is God and the Son is God, how can the conclusion be avoided that the Father just is the Son? Two things identical to a third thing are identical to each other, as even Euclid wrote so many years ago. Craig tries to avoid this problem by denying that the concept of numerical identity is even at stake in the New Testament's conception of the Trinity at all. But as a statement about what concepts the New Testament authors were familiar with, I think Craig's claim is plainly false.

By way of refutation of this point, I appeal to the Gospel of John. In chapter 9, Jesus heals a man who was born blind (vv. 1–8). After the healing takes place, his neighbors who had seen him blind and begging before ask themselves: "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" (v. 8). Some say that it is the very same person, whereas others say that it's actually someone else who only resembles the beggar (v. 9). Now, I think it is clear that what is at stake in this discussion is precisely the notion of numerical identity. Is this man who can see numerically the same man as the one we earlier knew to be blind, or is he only qualitatively similar to him?—that is the question being asked. Thus, I think it's plain as day that the authors of the New Testament did in fact have the notion of numerical identity. It would not

have been “foreign to them” (203), as Craig says. In fact, I would say that any person of sufficient intellectual endowment can tell the difference between saying that *A* just is the same thing as *B*, on the one hand, and that *A* and *B* only resemble each other while being different things, on the other. For that reason, I do not think Craig’s approach to avoiding the problems of numerical identity in formulating the doctrine of the Trinity succeeds.

Craig also rejects Tuggy’s interpretation of the “incarnation” of the Logos in John 1:1–18 as a personification of God’s wisdom coming to be perfectly embodied in the human being Jesus as “idiosyncratic” and subject to a “fatal flaw,” namely that “a literary personification cannot become flesh and live among us as a real person” (238). But this is also an unsuccessful argument, as far as I am concerned. In Baruch 3–4, God’s wisdom by which he created the world is compared to a woman and a rich householder (3:15) who “appeared on earth and lived with humankind,” specifically as “the book of the commandments of God” (3:38, 4:1). In Sirach 24, God’s wisdom is said to have set up camp in Jerusalem and serve him in the temple (24:8, 10–11), afterwards being identified explicitly with the Law of Moses (24:23). Thus, there is significant literary precedent for a personification of God’s wisdom “incarnating” as a physical reality in the sense of being embodied or expressed by them—in the case of Baruch and Sirach, as a book of laws, while in the case of John’s Gospel, as the human being Jesus.

Someone might complain that I am only “beating up” on Craig to the exclusion of everyone else. In fact, I would have much to say about the other contributors, as well, though I don’t have the space to say it here. I focus my critiques on Craig for at least two reasons. On the one hand, he is the most vociferous critic of Tuggy, with whose position I more closely align. Thus, I am to a certain extent “looking out for my own.” But on the other hand, Craig does present what I consider to be the strongest and worthiest arguments against Tuggy, especially on the matter of biblical exegesis. Alongside Tuggy, Craig is the contributor to this volume who focused the most on interpreting the New Testament data. There is also the fact that Craig is without a doubt the most prominent and respected contributor to this volume. Unitarians like Tuggy and others therefore have a “dragon to slay,” to use a violent metaphor in Craig’s style, if they are to win honor and a permanent place at the table in these discussions. As a final point, I will also mention the fact that Craig’s position is explicitly not Nicene in the historic sense: He rejects divine simplicity, for example, and the doctrine of the processions of the persons (118). Believe it or not, this is actually a point in his favor! I have argued in my *Trinity and Incarnation* (2023) that the total complex of Nicene doctrines—Trinity and Incarnation, divine simplicity, divine transcendence, *creatio ex nihilo*—is internally incoherent, and I suspect Craig would agree with me on that point. Denying some of those doctrines makes his position that much harder to argue against. There are fewer sources of “trouble” for his critics to draw from.

Leaving these points aside, I think that all in all this book is a worthwhile contribution to the ongoing discussion about the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology. I think it would make for interesting reading for the educated layman or academic with a passion for this discussion. It might not be as useful for novices or first-year undergraduate students, since much of the argument is quite advanced.

By way of conclusion, I would like to elaborate my earlier characterization of the debate about the Trinity as “ongoing.” In fact, from the earliest days of its formulation, this doctrine has been controversial and will perhaps remain such forever. Churches as religious institutions and official denominations may treat the doctrine of the Trinity as a settled matter, but the situation on the ground is often quite different. Many people these days are

debating whether the doctrine of the Trinity is biblical or necessary after all. I have also put forth a number of philosophical, biblical, and church-historical arguments against the doctrine in my own works. Social conditions are better these days for a cool, rational discussion about the doctrine's merits than they were in past times.

In my opinion, a great next step would be to publish a high-profile, one-on-one debate book between a single Trinitarian and a single non-Trinitarian, one in which the arguments from various points of view could be pursued at considerably greater length and with far greater precision than the more crowded "four views" model allows for. I want a debate book in which the cloth of debate is wrung dry, squeezed for all its worth, in which the discussion reaches a point beyond which there is truly nothing more to be said. Word counts are always the enemy of comprehensiveness, and the fewer people there are to share words with, the more words one has for oneself. Naturally, Tuggy would make an excellent candidate for such a book. Nor am I so modest as not to offer myself as a possible candidate for such a venture. As for the Trinitarian contributor, I leave that for Trinitarians to decide. The opposing team retains the right to name their own captain. Alternatively, it may be that a team of authors defends each side, rather than only one person, so that there would always be someone to speak from a position of expertise. The details would have to be worked out by whatever ambitious editor finds such a project worthwhile.

Thus, I think this multifaceted debate about the Trinity should be continued in another book. There is still so much more to say about the matter than has been said thus far. But until the day such a book is written and published, McIntosh's *One God, Three Persons, Four Views* will hold pride of place as the most philosophically and theologically significant debate book on the Trinity written thus far.

References

Nemes, Steven. 2023. *Trinity and Incarnation: A Post-Catholic Theology*. Cascade Books.