

Review of Hannah Bacon, *What's Right with the Trinity? Conversations in Feminist Theology*, Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing 2009, 225 pages, ISBN 978-0-7546-6673-8.

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What's Right with the Trinity? offers a response to several feminist criticisms of the doctrine of the Trinity, and also provides a careful articulation of an essential doctrine of the Christian faith from a feminist framework. Bacon's analysis of the traditional elaborations on the Trinity and her methodology (which emphasizes both a careful thinking and speaking about the triune God) provides a clear and useful guide for feminists who fear the traditional language and articulation of the Trinity fail to adequately describe the fullness of God. This work is an important contribution to the research area of gender and religion as it demonstrates how feminist methodology can interpret an important religious concept in original ways and overcome some of the barriers of previous scholarship. Bacon successfully demonstrates the value of rethinking traditional religious concepts with new perspectives and points of view.

Bacon states that she strives to 'assess the doctrine of the Trinity on the basis of its ability to affirm the key principles and values underpinning a feminist theological method which takes women's experience as its starting point' (p 7). Bacon contends that, in order to overcome some of the feminist criticisms concerning the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, a change is required. She proposes 'a shift in emphasis away from *speaking*

the Trinity to a consideration of Trinitarian thought (or 'logic') and an emphasis on *thinking* the Trinity' (p 3).

Bacon structures the book with the first part discussing the feminist critique of the traditional understanding of the Trinity. The second part contains Bacon's description of the feminist theological methodology to articulate the unique contributions of feminist experiences and thinking about the world. The third section combines Bacon's work in the previous sections to illustrate how the feminist theological methodology can be employed to understand the Trinity in ways that traditional theology failed to explore. Bacon begins part one of the book with an analysis of the range of feminist critiques of the doctrine of the Trinity. She highlights the discontent with the androcentric nature of descriptive language found in traditional discussions of the Trinity, and notes how that language and imagery 'serves to sacralize the patriarchal values of power, rule, authority, and self-sufficiency...which tend to depict God as a coercive, and controlling monarch who both justifies and supports abusive relationships' (p 15). Drawing upon the work of noted theologians including Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, Elizabeth Johnson, Delores Williams, and others, Bacon summarizes the feminist criticism that traditional theology has tended to reinforce the maleness of God, and thus justifies or reinforces predominantly patriarchal values which together perpetuate an unhealthy and inaccurate understanding of God and the Trinity. She argues that traditional Christian theology tends to use the event of the cross to glamorize suffering and male violence, while simultaneously subordinating the Spirit and not fully acknowledging the Spirit as feminine. Bacon's assessment of the feminist critiques is thoughtful and offers a solid assessment of the traditional trinitarian language which explores the biblical terms used for God, and provides alternatives that include female imagery to articulate God, de-sexing trinitarian language, and de-personalizing trinitarian language. Bacon concludes that traditional language must be supplemented with alternatives to articulate the fullness of the triune God while recognizing the limits of human speech for the Divine (p 51).

Chapter two provides a brief historical review of how the Trinity has been expounded by significant theologians. Bacon provides the historical foundation for discussing the Trinity by analysing the writings of Augustine, Gregory of Nazianzus, Karl Rahner, John Zizioulas, and Jürgen Moltmann. Using the contributions of the five theologians, Bacon provides five key concepts concerning the Trinity that she wishes to make central to her thesis of 'thinking' about the Trinity. These five core concepts include: the

significance of community and relationship, the triune relationships as distinct, the correspondence and lack of distinctness between the immanent and economic Trinity, the themes of temporality, change and suffering, and finally, the themes of hope, eschatology and redemption.

Bacon begins part two, 'Feminist Theological Methodology', with a chapter that discusses the contributions to understanding the Trinity provided by Schleiermacher and Barth. Both figures are important for a full understanding of how to proceed to think about the Trinity, as Bacon combines the starting points of Schleiermacher and Barth to develop what she terms an 'Orthodox-Contextual Theological Method'. She explains: 'Although the priority of God as triune can and must be upheld as the *ontological* starting point of theology ... at a logical and practical level, theology always begins with experience; from who we are rather than from who God is' (p 115).

Using the 'orthodox-contextual theological method', Bacon explores the role of women's experience in revelation and the ways in which feminist understandings of experience influence their thinking about the Trinity. Bacon draws upon the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray to articulate the use of the female body in theological discourse in a way that, Bacon suggests, avoids the problems of universalism and essentialism that previous feminist positions fail to acknowledge. Chapter five explores Irigaray's concept of *Parler-femme* ('speaking (as) woman') as Bacon turns from thinking about God to the question of how women are to speak about God. Bacon argues: '*Parler-femme* is a constructed, fluid and dynamic language that can be used to undo phallogocentric logic...although women are defined by phallogocentric discourse, they can actively use this language in order to construct another place for themselves within the symbolic order' (p 165).

The final section returns to a discussion of the Trinity in light of Bacon's understanding of the centrality of women's experience and the ability to use the language and logic of phallogocentrism. Bacon explores the concepts of difference, embodiment, subjectivity, self-love, relationship, and otherness as they relate to the Trinity and feminist thought. According to Bacon, 'God then need not be reimaged in *new* ways in order to resist and subvert the reproduction of male dominance in our thinking about God because thinking God as Trinity claims that God already eternally exists in such a way as to challenge and subvert these dynamics' (p 196). Bacon concludes that instead of asking the question of what is wrong with the Trinity, it is important to change the question to explore what is right with the Trinity. By theologically examining what is right with the Trinity,

feminists can gain valuable guidance about the eternal activity of the being of God and God's actions with humanity, which can lead to fruitful contemplation concerning difference and subjectivity.

The strengths of this volume include the depth of scholarship and the range of theologians which Bacon engages to explore the doctrine of the Trinity. This work is tightly written and provides thoughtful analysis of the doctrine of the Trinity and feminist concerns. *What's Right with the Trinity?* is recommended reading for those interested in exploring the Trinity through feminists critiques and discovering Bacon's satisfying engagement with traditional theologians while searching for useful theological guidance for speaking and thinking about God. This volume is also helpful for those interested in wrestling with traditional religious concepts with non-traditional perspectives to expand conventional paradigms and discover new and relevant methods to think and speak about important doctrines.