

## Barth Society will meet in Atlanta November 21-22, 2003

Our meeting in Atlanta will feature a Friday afternoon session from 4:00 P.M. to 6:30 P.M. and a Saturday morning session from 9:00 A.M. to 11:30 A.M. The theme of the Friday afternoon session will be *Barth's Ecclesiology Reconsidered*. The presenter will be Nick Healy, St. John's University, New York. The respondents will be John Yocum, Oxford University and Kimlyn Bender, Sioux Falls University. This session is listed as AM28 in the AAR program and will be held in MM-Consulate. The Saturday morning session will be held in HY-Courtland and is listed in the AAR program as AM84. The theme will be *Colin E. Gunton in Memoriam*. Papers in tribute to his work will be presented by Robert Jenson, Center of Theological Inquiry and John Webster, University of Aberdeen.

Those members of the Executive present Friday afternoon and Saturday morning should identify themselves to the Editor so that we might schedule an informal meeting during the convention to discuss important business matters relating to the Society.

The following Book Review was contributed by Archie J. Spencer, John H. Pickford Chair of Systematic Theology, Associated Canadian Theological Schools at Trinity Western University.

*Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology.* By Paul D. Molnar. London and New York: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2002 Pp. v + 357. Price: \$57.95. ISBN 0 567 08865 0

The driving concern for Molnar in his book on the divine freedom and the immanent Trinity is clearly stated in the opening paragraph of the Preface. Says Molnar, "At issue in a proper understanding of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity is the fact that, although we obviously have no alternative but to understand God in the categories available to us in our human experience, it is not anything within our experience or inherent in those categories that prescribes who God is *in se* and *ad extra*," (ix). Molnar immediately identifies the problem with much contemporary discussion of the Trinity, as well as the solution to that problem. "The paramount problem here concerns the fact that, since we know the triune God by grace and through faith, we cannot, as it were, read back our concepts and experiences into God. And a properly conceived doctrine of the immanent Trinity, while not designed to prevent this, will indeed do so to the extent that God's freedom is recognized and upheld through such a doctrine,"

(ix). Thus Molnar will need to dialogue with those theologians who have, through their Trinitarian formulations, tended to read human experience into God's inner life, thereby compromising both divine and human freedom.

Chapter one sets the tone for the book by identifying both the key proponents of a relational ontology that tends to supplant God in himself, and their implicit or explicit denial of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. Some theologians are led into an agnostic position in relation to the knowledge of God in that the knowledge of God is reduced to what we can know of God through "new experiences of liberation from male domination", which Molnar affirms are merely Rahnerian type "experiences of transcendence" wherein we come into a knowledge of God purely through the horizon of our experience. Elizabeth Johnson achieves this shift in Trinitarian focus through a *docetic* Christology that ultimately leads her to a conception of God who is named, not from his own self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but from women's experience. Here Molnar is concerned to highlight the fact that, "whenever and wherever the deity of the man Jesus is undermined or ignored, then and there God is defined by human experience rather than by revelation and thus *through* human experience,"

(13). Divine incomprehensibility becomes an agnosticism that requires ever increasing symbols to preserve the mystery, including feminine symbols, (13-14). Molnar's response represents his core concern in this book. He states that "a proper doctrine of the immanent Trinity begins and ends its reflections with Jesus Christ who *alone* can enable us to think from a center in God and not from a center within our male or female experience," (20).

Chapters two and three are given over to a discussion of the necessity for a return to a Christological starting point in Trinitarian thought, especially as it relates to the Immanent Trinity. The controlling feature of his Christological discussion is its being properly centered in the Church's understanding of Jesus Christ as the Lord who has revealed to us God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "At bottom revelation was not the disclosure of something hidden within history, but the disclosure of God himself who had entered history from outside". To say otherwise is to entertain a *docetic* and or *ebionite* Christology that ends in the neglect of "his antecedent existence as the pre-existent Word which is so critically important for a proper trinitarian understanding of divine-human relations", (29). Such is the case with Rahner's "anonymous Christianity", which is "an attempt to find God apart from Christ." This is why Barth denied the *analogia entis*. What Barth was "trying to avoid", in his rejection of the *analogia entis*, was *any* starting point in theology that bypassed Christ, (58). A proper Christology, therefore, requires that we fully affirm the pre-existence of Christ as the *logos asarkos* in order to avoid restricting the definition of God's eternal beginning to the economic Trinity.

This reading of the *logos asarkos* is supremely exemplified in Robert Jenson's theology. Jenson fails to clearly distinguish between the immanent and economic Trinity because of his tendency to read the events of history back into the inner life of God and "blurs the distinction" between "events in God and events in history". His rejection of the *logos asarkos* "strips Jesus of his uniqueness" and advances a "Hegelian notion of God's involvement in history." Thus, rather than Jesus' pre-existence as the *logos asarkos*, it is his resurrection that "determines" his Sonship in Jenson's theology. Jenson illustrates what happens to contemporary theologians when they do not formulate their

understanding in relation to a clear doctrine of the immanent Trinity. Had he made a clear distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, he would have been able to "acknowledge God's freedom consistently by not suggesting that Jesus, in his humanity as such, is the revealer; that Jesus was not eternally incarnate but that he pre-existed the incarnation as the *logos asarkos*; that the God who humbles himself on our behalf in the incarnation, cross and resurrection never was, is or will be dependent on the events within history to become who he will be," (80-81).

Molnar identifies Rahner's rule of identity as the cause of this pantheistic collapsing of the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity. The next four chapters are therefore dedicated to unpacking the implications of the failure to understand the difference between Rahner's doctrine of the Trinity and Barth's doctrine of the Trinity, which clearly distinguishes between the immanent and economic Trinity. In one sense it is the issue of the role of experience in theology that stands at the center of Molnar's treatment of contemporary Trinitarian thought. For Molnar nowhere is that problematic use of experience in theology more clearly illustrated than in Rahner's emphasis on "transcendental experience," especially as it relates to the immanent Trinity. Molnar identifies Rahner's rule of identity as naturally flowing out of his transcendental experientialist approach to theology. This is exemplified in C. LaCugna, G. Kaufman, E. Johnson, T. Peters, R. Jenson along with a host of other theologians.

Rahner's view of God as a "symbolic reality" clearly marks out his anthropological starting point. It is our transcendental experience of God that leads us to "objectivate" our religious experience, (119). Molnar recognizes the danger here: "this mutual coordination of God's action in history and our historical self-experience compromises the unique objectivity and freedom of God envisioned by the scriptural revelation and recognized and upheld in a properly conceived doctrine of the immanent Trinity," (121). Says Molnar, "Rahner's transcendental method, which begins with experience instead of with the acknowledgment of Jesus, the Word incarnate as the sole way to the Father, leads [Rahner] to think about the immanent and economic Trinity in categories drawn from his philosophy of symbol.

This in fact means that it is God as defined by our self-experience that Rahner portrays instead of God uniquely revealed in Christ," (124).

Molnar demonstrates the tendency to read this Rahnerian conception of experience in the Trinitarian thought of many contemporary theologians. When contrasted with Barth's emphasis on a clear distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity, these theologians illustrated a shared attitude toward such a distinction either by paying mere "lip service" to it or denying it and replacing it with an experientially derived relational ontology. Molnar identifies this Rahnerian starting point in Catherine LaCugna's theology. Similar patterns of thought can be detected in the Trinitarian theology of J. Moltmann, T. Peters, G. Kaufman and W. Pannenberg. All of these theologians tend to make relational ontology the subject and God in his inner life the predicate; although for Kaufman it is unlikely that God has an inner life at all. So, in relation to Ted Peters' thinking Molnar summarizes: "Hence, the tendency to see God as a dependent deity misses God's essential freedom and expresses an apotheosis via agnosticism, monism and dualism; thus God will not be completely who he is becoming until salvation is complete," (145). It is precisely here that we need to retrieve Barth's critical insight that God's freedom signifies that he is *a se*, (145). "The fact that in every way he is independent of all other reality does not in itself constitute God's freedom but its exercise. It does not constitute his divinity, but he is divine in it," (*CDII/1*, 307f; 146). In a summary Molnar clearly identifies the problem with "relational ontology" in Trinitarian theology. "Here contemporary trinitarian theology is in turmoil because the question has ceased to be: What is God, as God, saying to us in the humanity of the Word and in our humanity by the Holy Spirit uniting us to this Word in faith? The questions have become: How can we make the Trinity a doctrine which is alive so that it reflects our experience of faith and incorporates relationality and temporality into the divine life? Or how can relationality, which was given dogmatic status in the doctrine of the Trinity, enable us to conceive God in order to create a society of persons existing in freedom and equality? This is the kind of self-designed irrelevance that follows an inability to speak first

about God as God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and then, on that basis, about our relations with God, other creatures and the world in light of revelation and faith," (163).

This utilitarian application of relational ontology to the doctrine of the Trinity is exemplified in Moltmann's ecological doctrine of creation. Moltmann is a proponent of a panentheistic understanding of the Trinity that starts with experience and "reconstructs theology" in terms that "cannot allow for an 'immanent Trinity in which God is simply by himself'." He surrenders the traditional distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, and "eliminates any need to conceptualize a God truly independent of creatures," (199).

The remainder of Molnar's book is given over to a positive assessment of recent proposals for a more balanced understanding of the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity from theologians who have taken Barth's caution more seriously. These include Alan Torrance, Colin Gunton and Eberhard Jüngel. Insofar as they have been faithful to an insistence on the Christological grounding of the doctrine of the Trinity, following Barth's refusal to posit an absolute identity between the economic and immanent Trinity, these scholars have done the doctrine of the immanent Trinity an invaluable service. But Molnar is also critical of these scholars where they have failed, in implicit terms, to uphold the immanent Trinity. The appendix makes the connection between Molnar and this school of Trinitarian thought abundantly clear. The influence of T.F. Torrance on Molnar's thought is freely admitted and Molnar clarifies key differences between T.F. Torrance and Colin Gunton in the appendix.

Though its technical nature will leave some readers a little out side of the loop, nevertheless this book deserves the widest possible reading if for no other reason than to counter-balance the extreme anthropocentrizing that characterizes much Trinitarian thought today. Its broad and in-depth analysis of contemporary scholarship makes it a must read for serious scholars and students of theology. The consistency of Molnar's argument is admirable. He never tires of showing how the contemporary, uncritical application of Rahner's rule reduced the Sonship of Christ to a temporal, historical process thus reducing the immanent Trinity to an economic Trinity. Molnar's

identification of Rahner's "transcendental experience" as the root problem is on the mark. His grasp of Rahner is superb. Any suggestion of a misrepresentation of Rahner had better be as well informed or it will not stand the test. Molnar is to be commended for his consistent call for a construction of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity on the basis of the event of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ alone. In so doing Molnar has gone a long way toward clarifying the true nature of human freedom and the fact that our freedom is threatened when the freedom of God is limited in pantheistic or pantheistic terms.

Some might complain that he engages more in polemics than in a constructive theology. However, a careful reading of Molnar will reveal that he is not just "clearing the field" of false conceptions of the Trinity; he offers some constructive proposals as well. If there are any drawbacks to this book, they have more to do with Molnar's dense style, which at times contains so many nuances that it requires a few rereads to get the point. As it stands, this book must surely be counted as one of the most significant contributions to the Doctrine of the Trinity since Barth and Rahner put the issue back on the theological agenda. Dr. Molnar is to be both thanked and commended for a much-needed call for a clear grounding of the Trinity in Jesus Christ as the self-revealing God.

#### Food for thought:

"Christians can be, but do not have to be, particularly religious people. Similarly, particularly religious people can become and be Christians, but if they do they are not Christians in their quality as specially religious people. They are fortunate if their being such does not prevent them from becoming and being Christians! . . . Religiosity does not need to call upon a fatherly God. Hence it does not need any special movement and act of God. It does not need any baptism, sending, outpouring, and gift of the Spirit. It may work itself out in this way and take this form. But the spiritual life lives in invocation of God the Father and would be null and void without this special movement and act of this God, without the work of the Holy Spirit. . . Christians are people who, not of themselves, but moved by the Holy Spirit who is freely given them, find themselves in direct confrontation with God even though they are not like him but totally unlike. . .

It is in the history, work, and word of the one Mediator Jesus Christ that, in spite of everything that might interpose itself and come between, they find themselves directly confronted with God and thereby set in that freedom. In him everything that might separate them from God or prevent them from running to him as their Father is relativized, put in its place, and robbed of the power to separate. The difference between Christians and other folk is that Christians may believe in Christ, love him, hope in him, cling to him, and call upon God in his name. For them God is God, not in the mists of some transcendence, not on the basis of their own opinion, thought, or speculation, not in the form of an image projected by them, but in Jesus Christ. They are thus protected from the hubris in which they might want to be equal to him, or like him, or at least a match for him, from a merely supposed, because usurped immediacy in which he would in truth be absent and they would certainly not be sheltered from all the threats to their freedom. But to cling to Jesus Christ, and therefore to live to and before and with God, unafraid of all the threats, as children of the Father because brothers and sisters of his Son—this is not a matter of their own reason and power. Apart from the Holy Spirit, no one can or will call Jesus Christ the Lord (1 Cor. 12:3), and therefore no one can or will call upon God as Father and therefore in truth. That Christians can and will do this, because they may, is their spiritual life." Karl Barth, *The Christian Life, Church Dogmatics, IV/4, Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 92-3.

#### ANNUAL BARTH SOCIETY DUES

Everyone interested in joining the Karl Barth Society of North America is invited to become a member by sending your name, address and annual dues of \$15.00 (\$10.00 for students) to:

Professor Paul D. Molnar  
Division of Humanities—Bent Hall  
St. John's University  
8000 Utopia Parkway  
Jamaica, New York 11439  
Email: [molnarp@stjohns.edu](mailto:molnarp@stjohns.edu)

Checks drawn on a U.S. bank should be made payable to the Karl Barth Society of North America.  
*It is not too late to remit your dues for 2003.*