

**R.T. Mullins. *The End of the Timeless God*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016. xxiv + 248 pp. \$110.00 (hbk).**

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This is a lively and informative book, one of the first of the *Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology*. It is a polemical study of divine timelessness, cast in the form of a 'research program' in analytic theology. The author's is a Christian research program, not because timelessness is defined in Christian terms but because it has featured widely in current Christian philosophical theology, and has had a long and historically dominant place in Christian theology.

Dr. Mullins adheres to certain intellectual norms in carrying forward his program. Central is the avoidance of appealing to ineffability. Of course, if it is shown that a claim entails a self-contradiction that is one thing. But what if the consistency claimed cannot be disproved? Maybe what Mullins is claiming is that a position either entails a contradiction, or seems to, it is intellectually vicious to defend such a result by claiming that the matter in question is 'ineffable'. That's a position that is likely to come up quite often in philosophical theology. He is similarly concerned with the admission of non-literal language into the program. A Christian research program must avoid these vices. As far as I can see no argument is given for either of these positions.

The author has chapters on time and on eternity and then follow the main chapters; on omniscience and time, creation and time, four-dimensionalism and time, and the Incarnation and time. The discussion ranges widely across historical and contemporary writers, revealing wide reading, and with numerous arguments offered regarding individual positions and the alleged incoherence that the appeal to timelessness has engendered. These are often in a short and rather summary treatment, as the author moves on to the next thinker or problem. Nevertheless, these various matters will be of interest both to students of historical theology, philosophy of religion as well as to contemporary philosophical theologians.

The book is filled with interesting claims about God and time, and there is much to ruminate over, too much to do these claims justice in a brief review. A contemporary observer will readily see that the author's own outlook is part of a trend which over recent years has produced Process theism, Openness theism, and variations on classical theism, a trend moving in the direction of a more anthropomorphic, 'transparent' God who *inter alia* is very definitely in time. But the

sort of position that is at the heart of what Mullins is unhappy with, the doctrine of divine simplicity as entailing divine timelessness, has able contemporary defenders, who find this doctrine congenial and faithful to Scripture and to traditional theological methods. Those who take up Mullins's book should also look, for example, at those of James Dolezal or Steven Duby for fresh defenses of these standard views.

In what follows I identify three puzzle areas that may hinder the reader from being persuaded by Dr. Mullin's claims about timelessness made in the central chapters of his book.

First, Dr. Mullins thinks that eternalism is a modern conceit, and he holds that temporal presentism was a central feature of classical theism, which should be respected (e.g. 74–5). One reason the author provides for this is the failure of the concept of timeless eternity to cohere with or to elucidate Christian doctrine, another is a historical argument that the language of early theologians such as Augustine and Anselm is presentist, and that the linguistic culture in which they lived was presentist too. So, if I have understood, the positive part of Mullins's program is the retrieval of this presentist tradition.

The evidence he gives for classical theologians articulating presentism and not eternalism surprised me. Consider this quotation: Presentism "was believed by everyone, both the philosophers and the folk, until at least the nineteenth century; it is written into the grammar of every natural language; and it is still assumed in every life, even by philosophers who officially deny it"<sup>1</sup> (75). The insert is a quotation from John Bigelow. That's some claim! How anyone could know this to be true is a puzzle. Of course we all need the use of temporal indexicals to enable us to navigate in time. But what does that prove as to presentism or eternalism considered as metaphysical doctrines about God's relation to time?

The opening words of Book XI of Augustine's *Confessions* are: 'Lord, eternity is yours, so you cannot be ignorant of what I tell you. Your vision of occurrences in time is not temporally conditioned'.<sup>2</sup> For the writer, eternity is the Lord's; he occupies it, it seems. He tells us that such eternity is not temporally conditioned, so it is timeless or time-free eternity. If we take up the suggestion that this is not timeless eternity but divine presentness, it certainly cannot be a presentness that can be contrasted with the pastness or the futurity of the divine life. It is a time-free present. Whatever else Augustine may be doing in *Confessions* XI he is here contrasting creaturely, everyday language of change with the eternal abidingness of the Lord. Is it even clear that 'present' in 'God is eternally present to the entirety of time' has a temporal and not an exclusively cognitive connotation? Perhaps an advantage of calling God's eternity 'present' has to do with his omnipresence and not with temporality.

Second, on the idea of a Christian research program, the author lists a number of matters that are non-negotiable. But that word 'non-negotiable' is not sufficiently clear. The first of these 'hard-core' concepts is that of creation *ex nihilo*, understandably so (3) – in fact, in the index 'Creation' has more entries than any others covered in the body of the book. It enters as an important factor in his

<sup>1</sup> John Bigelow, "Presentism and Properties," *Nous* 30 (1996), 35

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), 221

discussions of presentism and eternalism, then. Does that involvement never disturb its non-negotiable status in the research program? What the criteria are for qualifying as 'hard-core' are not stated. Is the 'hard-core' to be unnegotiable, intended to be 'mere Christianity' which ought never to be questioned in a Christian research project?

But could being a devil's advocate be part of a research program? Or a *reductio argument*? Some strategy which calls into question the entire project? I really cannot see how this theoretical apparatus does much good. In any case, other possibly important features of a research program have been overlooked. For example, there is a normativity to some research programs. We are familiar with weighing up pleasure against duty, and the long term against the short term. The researcher, whether in the natural or social sciences, may be faced with cost-benefit calculations in coming to her conclusions. What is she prepared to surrender? The exercising of options or choices when there are costs and benefits to each of the options is not something Dr. Mullins refers to. But aren't a person's philosophical conclusions sometimes affected by what she is prepared to put up with?

Further, there are moves in research that the author does not discuss or weigh that might be helpful. For example, the postulation of unobservables to account for data. One way of thinking of divine simplicity may be to think of it as such an 'unobservable'. It then would be what is postulated to account for certain Scriptural data. So the fact that Scripture does not avow divine simplicity in so many words would not then count decisively against it, and the fact that only it may unify data which Scripture provides of the unity of the divine being may be a reason to espouse it.

Further still, the Christian theologian is not dealing with data that are so easily manipulable as are scientific data, hard as they may be to manipulate. Every researcher of states of affairs that unavoidably refer to God is up against his own finitude. The faith seeking understanding tradition occupies much of the author's attention. Yet may he not have overlooked the modesty of the 'seeking'? It is ominous that every finding of the author's program is in the direction of domesticating the transcendence and mysteriousness of the deity. An infinite spirit creating the immeasurable universe by a word? Isn't that 'non-negotiable' simply asking for trouble? Ought not a research director to wonder whether his kit of tools is fitted for his goals, and whether his imagination and ambition do not outrun the capabilities of his tool box to satisfy them? Do researchers not need to learn at what point to stop pursuing their research into the divine mysteries? It would have been good to have had discussion of such matters.

The author is particularly hard on the doctrine of ineffability. As far as I can see there is nothing in his tool kit that can handle divine incomprehensibility. Such a concept as used by the tradition is 'graded'. It is said that we may *apprehend* what we cannot *comprehend*. The incomprehensible is not what is gibberish. We know in part. But God's ways are past finding out. They render one speechless. No human can plumb the depths. This is galling to the analytic theological researcher. To be sure, the card of ineffability may be played too easily and lazily. While no researcher of Christian theology ought to play that card whenever he is stuck, often he is up against manifest mysteries, due to the juxtaposition of the infinite with the finite. The

Incarnation, the Creation, the operation of divine grace in the soul, are in this category; and the Trinity is famously mysterious. When in his *Enchiridion*, for example, Augustine wrote of God that 'in a way unspeakably strange and wonderful even what is done in opposition to His will does not defeat his will'<sup>3</sup> he is not saying that this state of affairs is manifestly self-contradictory. Rather that it surpasses our understanding, but that for all that we do well not to drop it.

Thirdly, divine simplicity. For all the author's sense of the importance of historical debates, he takes for granted the currently-appealing assumption that divine simplicity is equivalent to divine featurelessness. He does not seem to take into account the fact that most of those in the tradition who subscribed to divine simplicity were Trinitarians. Far from his being featureless, for them God is tri-personal in his being. While there are no parts in the deity, there are distinctions that must be made, as God the Father is distinguished from God the Son and from God the Holy Spirit.

As Richard Muller has observed,

According to traditional orthodoxy, there *are* distinctions in God, but they are distinctions that in no way detract from or impugn the non-compositeness and, therefore, the ultimacy of the divine essence. By way of example, the doctrine of the Trinity indicates that there are personal or relational distinctions in the Godhead – but, as the Patristic doctrine of the Trinity (affirmed in toto by the scholastic tradition) indicates, threeness of person does not conflict with oneness of essence.<sup>4</sup>

At the end Dr. Mullins advises that as a result of the arguments of his most interesting book the divine timelessness research program should be abandoned. His closing words call to mind Hume's about sophistry and illusion. 'Divine timelessness has had a long run in Church history, but it is time to bury it and move on. We should not mourn its passing. It shall not be missed' (209). It's hard not to regard this as somewhat premature.

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<sup>3</sup> St. Augustine, *The Enchiridion of Faith, Hope and Love*, ed. Henry Paolucci, trans. J.F. Shaw (Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1961), Ch. 100, 117.

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, (4 volumes), (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2003), III.41.