

Linn Marie Tonstad. *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude. Gender, Theology and Spirituality.* New York and London: Routledge, 2016. x+302 pp. \$148.00 (hbk); \$49.95 (paper).

Fellipe do Vale
Southern Methodist University

In accounts of 20th century theology, at least two developments are typically featured: first, the revival of trinitarian theology; and second, the acceptance of gender as a category for theological investigation. It should come as no surprise, then, that theologians have attempted to understand one in light of the other – either gender in light of the trinity, or the trinity in light of gender. Both of these moves, argues Linn Tonstad, result in problematic articulations of trinitarian doctrine or conceptions of gender. Surveying theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar, Graham Ward and Sarah Coakley, she shows that neither the trinity nor gender are supposed to take their cues from one another. Instead, Tonstad suggests that queer theory proffers helpful insights that chart the way for correction. Part one of her book is devoted to highlighting and critiquing the connection between gender and the trinity; part two brings forward some conversation partners off of whom she builds; part three is her constructive proposal.

Methodologically, Tonstad’s book has two ‘voices.’¹ Voice 1 is “motivated by commitments often considered traditional,” including Nicene trinitarianism, Chalcedonian Christology, “dependence on divine self-revelation” and a commitment to the bodily resurrection at the return of Christ (2, cf. 224). Voice 2 is the voice of the queer theorist, “informed by anti-inclusive, antinormative, and antiequality queer critiques and radical (rather than equality or difference) feminism” (3). Readers unfamiliar with these terms will benefit from prior research, as Tonstad does not define them. There are, however, some identifying features of Voice 2: it does not simply accept appeals to divine revelation but inquires about how those appeals “serve in part to occlude how our own temptations push us toward worship of a Father-God whom we explicitly seek to deny” (191); it examines theological loci “using over-literalization, catachresis, and other forms of mimesis,” terms those familiar with the work of Judith Butler will recognize (204); it seeks to subvert the

¹ See the recent symposium by Brandy Daniels, Karen Kilby, Gerard Loughlin, Eboni Turman, Sarah Coakley and Paul DeHart, “God and Difference by Linn Tonstad,” *Syndicate Theology*, May 14, 2017, <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/god-and-difference/>. For the specific terminology, see Sarah Coakley’s contribution.

social order insofar as it establishes a false decency that “loves and acts inside the rules” (269); and it makes substantial use of postmodern philosophy and the “masters of suspicion” (270). One of Tonstad’s aims for the book is to “effect rapprochement between systematics and its others,” harmonizing Voices 1 and 2 (3).

Tonstad begins part one by outlining four trinitarian problems present in the thought of contemporary theologians (17): (a) Subordination of the Son and/or the Spirit to the Father; (b) Overemphasis on ‘Rahner’s Rule,’ resulting in the involvement of death in the relations that substantiate the three Persons; (c) Corrective projectionism, the attempt to resolve the problems of human existence by generating a trinitarian theology “that shows how the constitutive relationships of the trinity uniquely critique and overcome such human problems” (13); (d) The ways aspects of sex and gender often color problems (a)-(c). The remainder of part one of her book is taken up with substantiating these problems in Balthasar, Ward and Coakley.² These chapters, as with chapter six, are written with Voice 1; in chapters five and seven (as well as the second half of chapter four), Voice 2 appears.

Chapters one and two examine Balthasar and Ward, respectively. Both attempt to connect the differences between trinitarian persons with gender difference (cf. 30, 58, 60). This makes ‘difference’ into a closed concept, that is, a concept with defined necessary and sufficient conditions, rendering it analyzable in a stretch of different contexts. Tonstad rightly observes that it is much more like an open concept, that is, one with sufficient conditions but no informative necessary conditions.³ Thus it matters *what kind* of difference is in question, and transpositions from trinitarian difference to gender difference assume that analyses of difference are not contingent upon their relata. However, “there are terms belonging to the relation between God and creation that should not apply within created relationships and vice versa” (47).

Of particular interest to readers of this journal will be Tonstad’s chapter on Sarah Coakley, noted as “the favorite feminist of those theologians and analytic philosophers of religion most hostile to or uninterested in gender concerns” (98). She focuses on three ways Coakley thinks contemplative prayer combats patriarchy. First, contemplation ensures that the correct sense of Fatherhood is in place when we address God, disabusing our language of all human formulations. Here Tonstad still thinks Coakley “retains rather than undoes a relation to human fatherhood,” because we still project the masculine title onto God (102). (Tonstad later argues that the names ‘Father,’ ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ are simply three among many of God’s economic names, not designating God’s immanent relations, 236.) Second, contemplation renders gender labile, a theme Coakley draws from Gregory of Nyssa. Tonstad objects that even in this lability, Coakley retains problematic gender associations, using feminine metaphors for that which is not divine (i.e., the church is a feminine bride while Christ is a masculine bridegroom) (cf. 103). Third, contemplative prayer prioritizes the Spirit, which disrupt binaries such as “man/woman.” The issue here is

² Regarding Balthasar, see pg. 44 for (a) and 46 for (b) and (d); problem (c) does not appear in Tonstad’s exegesis of Balthasar. Problems (a)-(d) are especially conspicuous in Ward’s theology: see pgs. 62 for (a), 79-80 for (b), 83 for (c), and 86 for (d). Tonstad notes that her objections to Coakley are somewhat different, and it seems that only problems (c) and (d) are found (98).

³ William Abraham has argued that ‘action’ is a concept like this. See his *Divine Agency and Divine Action: Exploring and Evaluating the Debate*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

that Coakley engages in “a kind of theological numerology,” where dualisms are in need of repair by God’s “threeness” (107). How this happens, or to what purpose, or why it is that some binaries are disrupted but not others, is never stated by Coakley.

These three themes make up the core of Tonstad’s objections, and it seems that only the third has any real purchase on Coakley’s views. The first depends on Tonstad’s own constructive proposal about the names of the persons of the trinity and the second neglects that Coakley’s point in using gendered images for the God/world relationship is to *destabilize* their gendered associations. Tonstad also claims that “the Son need not be divine on her model” of kenosis (111). But here she seems to confuse a *demonstration* of the involvement of Christ in the life of human prayer for an *argument* for the divinity or personhood of the Son. Tonstad suggests that an adoptionist Christology can accommodate Coakley’s model of kenosis and desire, but this does not entail that Coakley’s Christology is adoptionist. Instead, it shows that a feature of Coakley’s theology is compatible with adoptionism – but Coakley may (and does) have independent reasons for rejecting it.⁴ Tonstad’s chapter concludes with some remarks on Coakley’s ethnography, most of which are not necessary for Tonstad’s main points of argumentation.

Part one rounds off with a summarizing interlude that sets up the constructive portion of the book. What Balthasar, Ward and Coakley have failed to do, according to Tonstad, is to see that “there can be *some* differences between who God is eternally in God’s own blessed being, and the way and means by which God reveals Godself in history’s fractures and fragmentations” (134).⁵ Attention to the kinds of difference at play in the latter provides the sufficient nuance needed to prevent problematic connections between the doctrine of the trinity and gender. This would also lead those theologians guilty of problem (b) mentioned above (i.e., overemphasizing ‘Rahner’s Rule’ to such an extent that death inevitably plays a vital role in distinguishing the divine persons one from another) to see that death cannot belong to God (*ibid.*). These conclusions, uttered in Voice 1, are surely welcome, even if they serve as critiques of interlocutors about whom the problems in question may or may not be true. The shift to her constructive portion also introduces a shift to Voice 2, the key desideratum of which is a trinitarian theology that is attentive to queer theory. Thus, in one of the book’s more unfortunate turns of phrase, Tonstad posits that “God needs human infidelity; God needs to be led astray on a leash held by the queer theologian” (139).⁶ Part two, then, will take its cues from queer theory in order to avoid the problems identified in part one.

Before specifying how queer theory will do that, Tonstad surveys three more theologians (Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Kathryn Tanner), this time allies in her aims. Though all three retain some sort of subordination of the Son to the Father (cf. 176), they also suggest a way forward by emphasizing a “salvific assumption” in trinitarian theology rather than an “epistemic assumption.” The

⁴ For an example of Coakley’s anti-adoptionist tendencies, see her recent essay “Person of Christ,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Summa Theologiae*, ed. Philip McCoskey and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁵ All cited emphases are original to Tonstad.

⁶ Such a phrase is inspired by the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, whose influence is scattered throughout this book.

former holds that “only God can save,” while the latter says that “only God can reveal Godself as God really is, and God does so in Jesus” (158). Overemphasizing the latter lands a theologian in importing death into trinitarian relations; emphasizing the former allows the theologian to say that there are certain aspects Christ’s mission that occurred for our salvation and are not informative of immanent trinitarian relations, the nuanced view at which she aims (cf. 175).

Chapter 5 then articulates how queer theory might aid trinitarian theology.⁷ She begins by identifying the ‘phallus’ of theological discourse. The ‘phallus,’ as Tonstad understands it, symbolizes “meaning’s stabilization” and “the possibility of plenitudinous self-identity,” which results in theologians having the idea that “there is not even a subliminal possibility of patriarchy in the name ‘Father’ for God” (205, 194). In other words, theologians who wish to retain the name ‘Father’ are ‘phallic’ insofar as they are setting the terms for right or wrong speech about God, which is something epistemically immodest. Even worse, this amounts to idolatry (cf. 196-7). What Tonstad seems to be against is a false sense of “self-securitization” that she finds in most trinitarian theology – when theologians seek to establish trinitarian normativity, they set the parameters of orthodoxy, thereby pronouncing those who fall outside of such orthodoxy condemned (270). But only God has the authority to do this; therefore, ‘phallic’ theologians are idolatrous. Needless to say, this is an argument that moves rather too quickly – ‘phallic’ theologians are usually careful to distinguish dogmatic rank, judging the pronouncements of ecumenical councils much higher than individual theological opinions.⁸ Thus, it would not follow that individual pronouncements of trinitarian normativity establish the parameters of orthodoxy, making Tonstad’s charge of idolatry misplaced. At bottom, Tonstad seems to favor queer theory because it provides a strategy “beyond the stipulative language often employed in theology and analytic philosophy of religion,” and thereby offers a more modest epistemic standpoint (6, cf. 270-1). But analytic philosophers and theologians regularly point out that other approaches are no more *intrinsically* epistemically modest than analytic ones – epistemic modesty is a virtue required of all Christian theologians and the claims they make, not a component part of any one theological method.⁹ Additionally, Tonstad gives us no reason as to why normativity in a theological conclusion is incompatible with epistemic modesty. But if this is the primary contribution of Voice 2, it is hard to see what work queer theory is doing for Tonstad’s argument after all, since one can affirm all of her former conclusions about trinitarian theology without it.

⁷ Note that one’s opinions about homosexuality do not entail one’s opinions about queer theory; one may have positive opinions regarding the full inclusion of same-sex couples in the church without thinking that queer theory is a successful aid for theology.

⁸ See, for example, Oliver D. Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 16: “the work of individual theologians...is not as important for the purposes of systematic theology, as confessions or ecumenical councils.”

⁹ Kevin Corcoran articulates this well: “there have been, and continue to be, Anglo-analytic philosophers and philosophical realists who are less than humble, who are, sadly, arrogant, narrow-minded idolaters. But arrogance and idolatry are equal opportunity employers” (“Who’s Afraid of Philosophical Realism? Taking Emerging Christianity to Task,” in Scot McKnight et al., eds., *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What’s Emerging* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).

Chapters six and seven contain Tonstad's proposal for a trinitarian theology properly attuned to the putative desiderata of Voice 2. What results is "a proposal for how the trinity should be understood without relations of origin – a prerequisite for avoiding subordination within the trinity" (222). The relations that will accomplish this are "relationships of intensification or gift-circulation" (228). Thus, the Son is the one who "glorifies" (cf. 229), the Spirit "gives power to the Father and the Son" (230) and the Father "names the Son" (230). These *just are* their constitutive relations: "All give, but in different ways, and those different ways *are* their divine personhood" (229). How these restructured relations are different from relations of origin so as to avoid subordination is something that Tonstad leaves unclear.¹⁰

But if the trinity is not where the theologian interested in understanding gender ought to turn, then where? Tonstad suggests the "transformation of materiality" that occurs in the Eucharist (232-3). This is where God has established "banquets without borders" in his relationship with humankind (238). Assuming that Christ's resurrected appearances reveal that "spatial location becomes coinhabitable," Tonstad posits a version of impanation where "the bread has the same kind of relationship to the Word that the humanity of Christ has" (240). The church's partaking in the Eucharist thus structures its relationships as it awaits the return of Christ (cf. 256). Additionally, impanation shows that "Christ's body moves past even sexual difference and joins itself to the materiality of the entire world" (246) – he is no longer merely male. As the church waits for this Christ, it also testifies to "the negation of the stability and viability of the symbolic order" (269). This "introduces a fold in the subject's ties to itself and its identities. The apocalyptic injunction robs the apocalyptic subject of any fixed identitarian position," including one's own gender (274). So, in the end, because of the unfastening of our eschatological identities, our genders will be overcome (275).

The inferential moves in the last chapters are hard to trace. We quickly move from Christ's resurrected appearances to impanation to the reconfiguration of all materiality; such connections, however, are far from perspicuous. Christ's ability to assume both a human nature and an indefinite number of Eucharistic elements is supposed to complicate the maleness of his body, but even if this is true,¹¹ why this should complicate anyone's gender who is not impanated is not explained. Additionally, the church's eschatological hopes are supposed to destabilize any certainty of gender identity, but the premises that would support this are more dependent on descriptions of 'phallic' theology from Kent Brintnall and Lee Edelman (where 'phallic' means having "a plenitudinous self-identity," even in the future) than the usual eschatological picture provided by Christian theology. Christian theologians have been far more willing to accept a degree of gender continuity to the resurrected body (cf. 1 Cor. 15:39, 58).¹² Tonstad has argued that gender theorizing should not

¹⁰ As Coakley points out, "God and Difference by Linn Tonstad": "It is unclear why 'gift' does not always already imply some sort of origin and reception."

¹¹ For that to be true, it seems like a stronger claim than impanation is needed. The Word would need to assume a female human nature in addition to his male human nature, a claim stronger than impanation.

¹² See, for instance, Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. William Babcock, vol. I/7, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press,

fall under the bailiwick of trinitarian theology, but the reconfiguration of materiality and time do not seem to orient us any better in understanding gender as a theological category. These ambiguities make uncertain the ability of Tonstad's constructive arguments to fill the void left by her objections to the use of trinitarian theology for understanding gender.

But in the end, the most pervasive problem that besets Tonstad's book is the incompatibility between Voices 1 and 2. This is because the desiderata established for Voice 1 are not obviously compatible with Voice 2 – are we supposed to trust the development of trinitarian doctrine (as in 227) or are we supposed to be suspicious of the connection between the “great trinitarian theologies and ecclesiastical misogyny across history” (247 n. 10)? Are we supposed to avoid the “suggestive rhetorical tropes and rhetorical questions” with which Tonstad charges Coakley (129 n. 101), or are we supposed to adhere to such uses when queer theory offers them, as when Tonstad suggests we “move from dick-sucking to clit-licking in touching God's transcendence” (141)? More could have been said by Tonstad about the role Scripture plays for each Voice, the relevant criteria for theological epistemology, and so on. Ultimately, it is hard to avoid Coakley's conclusion on the book as a whole: “The two Voices in *God and Difference* are hard to hear harmoniously...not least because they seem to be operating with different and fundamentally incompatible presumptions.”¹³

Tonstad has given theology something valuable insofar as she has raised the question of the dogmatic location of gender. Theologians *should* think as theologically as possible about gender, and they should be sensitive to the neighboring theological loci that may or may not aid in that task. Additionally, *analytic* theologians ought to join in – we too need to show that our method is theologically responsible when it comes to analyses of gender. At her best, Tonstad is compelling in showing that trinitarian doctrine alone simply cannot bear the full explanatory weight for our understandings of gender, if at all. But one need not find queer theory compelling to see this, leaving Voice 1 to carry the burden of the argument.

2012), XXII.17, 526: “...some people believe that women will not rise again with their female sex...But the more sensible view, it seems to me, is the one held by those who do not doubt that both sexes will rise again...female sex is not a fault but a matter of nature...The female organs will still be present. Now, however, they will be accommodated not to their former use but to a new beauty...they will evoke praise for the wisdom and compassion of God, who both created what was not and freed what created from corruption.”

¹³ Coakley, “God and Difference by Linn Tonstad.”