

H.E. Baber. *The Trinity: A Philosophical Investigation*. London: SCM Press, 2019. 256pp. \$92.00 (hbk)

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In *The Trinity: A Philosophical Investigation*, H.E. Baber's overall goal is not to give or endorse one specific theory of the Trinity. Instead, she redraws the boundaries of what theorizing about the Trinity should look like. And she lays the groundwork for further speculation about the Trinity. Here I will highlight three of the most distinctive and interesting aspects of Baber's project as found in this manuscript.

1. Method

Baber's strategy is this: don't worry about matching one's theory of the Trinity with the precise formulations offered in the creeds. Those formulations are based on philosophies that are inferior to what we have on offer today. Instead, focus on the philosophical and religious problems that motivated the creeds. Find the best solution to those problems. And the best solution may not fall within the boundaries of the creeds.

This is a specific application of Baber's more general approach to Christian theology. Baber rejects the idea that the most fundamental source of data for speculating about theological matters is what is in the Bible or the Creeds or the pronouncements of bishops with appropriate apostolic credentials. On Baber's view, what is authoritative is the practice of the Church. And those other things, to the extent that they have authority, possess it in a way that is derivative from these ecclesial practices.

2. Counting Gods

Baber maintains that we should be open to theories of the Trinity that do not posit exactly one God. We should identify what is important to monotheism, and separate monotheism from the deeper motivation that gave rise to it. As she puts it:

Early writers, including writers of the Old Testament, were not preoccupied with counting deities. They were certainly keen to distinguish their views from those of their polytheistic pagan contemporaries but their concern was not so much in counting Gods as

in what should be counted as a God. The repeated complaint in the Hebrew scriptures was not that the nations were polytheistic but that they were idolatrous—not that they worshipped too many divine beings but that the beings they worshipped were not divine or worthy of worship. Once they concluded that there was only one supernatural being who qualified as divine in the strictest sense, hence that there was one and only one God properly speaking, identity and counting came in. The counting question however was motivated by an interest in what it took to count as (a) God. It was recognized early on that supernatural beings that pagans took to be gods, if they existed at all, did not have what it took and, eventually, it was agreed that only the one God had what it took. Monotheism was, so to speak, a byproduct of that more fundamental concern with the criteria for divinity. This should lead us to reconsider the rationale for understanding the Trinitarian Persons as one God and to ask why (and perhaps whether) identity is what matters—a question posed by similar puzzles concern the identity of ordinary persons (16-17).

So we can distinguish between:

The Superficial Desideratum: When counting the number of Gods, stop at one.

and

The Deeper Desideratum: Make sure that what you are counting as a God is really a God.

Baber thinks that whether a theory of the Trinity satisfies *The Superficial Desideratum* is unimportant. The number of Gods we get to when we count is irrelevant to the core motivation of monotheism. It just doesn't matter. On the other hand, a theory that satisfies the deeper motivations of monotheism is good enough in the present context.

3. The Members of the Trinity as Places in a Structure

On the orthodox view, the members of the Trinity share their intrinsic properties. Yet they are distinct. This yields a contradiction given the following plausible principle:

Strong Dissimilarity of the Diverse: Two objects are distinct only if there is some intrinsic property that one has and the other lacks.

Baber considers a number of interesting heretical strategies for dealing with this problem. And, given her overall method, she doesn't want to constrain theorizing to orthodoxy. Nevertheless, orthodox solutions to the problem are among the ones Baber offers.

One such solution appeals to:

Structuralism: A theory about a domain of inquiry is structuralist =def that theory identifies objects not in terms of intrinsic properties but instead in terms of the place of those objects in a structure.

Take the natural numbers. Suppose we want to know what the number 2 is. There are different ways of reducing numbers to sets. And on different ways of doing it the number 2 turns out to be a different set. There is no principled way to decide which of these sets the number 2 reduces to. And it seems implausible to say that 2 reduces to one of the sets but not the others and we just don't know which reduction is correct. The structuralist about natural numbers will maintain that the number 2 is not any of the sets. It is instead a place in a structure. In particular:

The number 2 is the successor of the successor of the number 0, the predecessor of 3, the first prime number, and so on.

There are different ways in which the number 2 may be exemplified as illustrated by the different reductions of the natural numbers to sets. But 2, and the rest of the natural numbers, are places in a structure. The existence of the natural numbers is exhausted by their relational properties. They have no intrinsic properties.

Take fermions for another example of this. In the singlet state, each member of a pair spins in the opposite direction of the other. But neither member of the pair spins in a definite direction alone. For the structuralist, fermions in the singlet state are distinguished by relational properties.

Baber holds that this is the beginning of one way of articulating the orthodox view of the members of the Trinity and that it is substantially anticipated by Aquinas. On this view: the members of the Trinity are distinguished by the begetting and procession relations. The Father begets the Son. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Baber suggests analyzing begetting and procession in terms of grounding.

4. Evaluation

Baber defends an underexplored and distinctive perspective in philosophy of religion. I am glad that someone is working this sort of view out. I highly recommend Baber's book.