

# Books In Review

TRINITY AND TRUTH. By BRUCE D. MARSHALL. *Cambridge University Press*. 287 pp. \$64.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

*Reviewed by R. R. Reno*

THERE IS A DANGER in reviewing books written by theologians one knows, respects, and argues with on a regular basis. Arguments that might otherwise appear compressed and clipped come across as economical and effective. Digressions seem suggestive rather than distracting. Implicit structural design appears obvious rather than obscure. Unarticulated assumptions and unspoken consequences are evident. Insights overwhelm inadequacies, and one is too grateful for the overall edifying effect to complain about any particular defects. While reading Bruce Marshall's new book, *Trinity and Truth*, all these things happened to me. As a result, my response is to commend: this is a very important, challenging, and powerful book that provides both insight into and a measure of guidance out of the crisis of Christian theology in the West.

Marshall's central polemical claim is that much of modern theology has taken an incoherent approach to the justification of Christian beliefs. We cannot avoid observing that Christian faith entails holding beliefs about Jesus, the Father who sent him, and the Spirit who bears witness. These beliefs are "central" or "essential" in a descriptive sense. If no one believes such things, then there are no Christians. If we wish to

be Christian, then we must hold these central trinitarian beliefs as *epistemically primary* with respect to other beliefs. That is to say, "the Church will decide about the truth of other beliefs by seeing how well they fit, or cohere, with the beliefs which constitute its identification of the triune God."

As Marshall rightly observes, modern theology assumes that such a claim "can only make the conflict between modernity and Christian belief worse." If, it is feared, theologians insist on the trinitarian identification of God as epistemically primary, Christianity will consign itself to an intellectual ghetto, driving theology even farther from mainstream thought and compromising the possibility that theology might be a respected intellectual practice in the university. In reaction to this prospect, modern theologians try to avoid basing their theological arguments on distinctively Christian claims about Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit.

Worried about intellectual respectability, theology seeks some measure by which to decide whether its claims are true or false, basically plausible or not, and so on. Marshall identifies three epistemological standards that Christian theologians use to avoid the trinitarian standard. The first is an interiority thesis, that Christian beliefs about the triune God "are justified to the extent that they adequately express certain inner experiences." Readers familiar with George Lindbeck's postliberal project will recognize this as the "experiential-expressivist" approach to religious truth. The second thesis is foundationalist. Here, justified Christian beliefs are "tied in virtue of their meaning to self-evident or incorrigible data." This parallels, roughly, the "propositionalist" approach. To these two theses Marshall adds a third, the epistemic dependence thesis, "according to which the primary criteria for deciding about the truth of Chris-

tian beliefs, at least in part and perhaps in whole, must not themselves be distinctively Christian."

THEOLOGIANs, like most intellectuals, tend to be influenced as much by fashionable trends as by arguments themselves. By and large, both the interiority and foundationalist theses have little cultural currency at present. Nobody wants to be a foundationalist these days, and the popularity of the slogan "there is no uninterpreted experience" deters theologians from adopting the interiority thesis. The dependence thesis, however, goes pretty much unchallenged. It makes the apparently modest and minimal claim that a Christian is not justified in believing what he does unless he submits his belief, at least in part, to the demands of contemporary intellectual life.

This sounds perfectly reasonable, but it is easier said than done. Christians say that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Modern natural science and social science advance no teaching about the identity of God. How, then, is one to establish the relationships of identity and material non-contradiction necessary to demonstrate that one's faith is "intellectually honest"? How can the *set x* of Christian beliefs be brought into a logically significant relation to *set y* of putatively modern beliefs?

Marshall shows how, from Schleiermacher to Bultmann and from Rahner to Tracy, modern theology has pursued this goal by adjusting the meaning of Christian beliefs, so that *set x* and *set y* are interpreted toward a common point of contact. However widespread these efforts might be, far from making Christianity more philosophically respectable, a "hermeneutical" approach produces hopeless confusions. From Gottlob Frege to Donald Davidson, modern philosophers have argued that one cannot discern the meaning of what people say without deciding about the truth of what is being said. As

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Marshall puts the matter, paraphrasing Frege, "the meaning of a sentence is, or is given by, its truth conditions." We decide what a statement means only insofar as we have clearly formulated notions about how it might be true.

Marshall develops and expands this contemporary reflection on the relation between meaning and truth, and in so doing he casts serious doubt on the efficacy of the standard procedures of modern theology. If meaning depends upon truth conditions, and if Christian beliefs are held, in faith and worship, as epistemically primary, then any attempt to make the justification (truth conditions) of Christian beliefs dependent upon non-Christian beliefs will change their meaning. As a consequence, quintessential modern theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann cannot show that Christian faith is "intellectually responsible." They can

only show that a certain "idea of Christianity," mediated by Christian language and practice, is "intellectually responsible."

Marshall identifies Bultmann's procedure very clearly. To say "Jesus rose from the dead" is not intellectually responsible, but the gnomic utterance that "the kerygmatic proclamation of Jesus' resurrection mediates God's definitive promise of salvation in the cross and makes possible authentic existence" is just the sort of thing that "modern man" can affirm (or so Bultmann claims). Christianity comes out true, but at the cost of substituting a new, "kerygmatic" meaning for the plain sense of Christian belief.

DRAWING ON Donald Davidson's reflections on truth and interpretation, Marshall shows how this revisionist position is untenable. To the extent that modern theologians must

ascribe new meaning to particular Christian beliefs so that they will come out true within the "modern worldview," they "systematically increase the likelihood that these interpretations will be implausible," not only for distinctive Christian beliefs, but for all beliefs. In other words, for all their purported "hermeneutical" sensitivity, modern theologies that subscribe to the dependence thesis produce extraordinarily dubious interpretations of almost every belief they encounter.

This tendency is evident. Consider Karl Rahner's influential *Foundations of the Christian Faith*. Rahner interprets the meaning of "the evolutionary worldview" as "the basic tendency of matter to discover itself in spirit through self-transcendence." The proper conceptual meaning of the Christian belief that Jesus rose from the dead is that God accepts and affirms the definitive fulfillment of human self-transcendence in freedom. Thus interpreted, both meanings may be correlated, and Rahner feels confident that he has shown how the modern believer can affirm the truth of the modern scientific worldview and the historic commitments of faith. But this affirmation is possible only if one adopts the radically implausible assumption that nearly all the sentences used by both scientists and Christians do not mean what we ordinarily think they mean. Thus, the dependence thesis in theology is not only repugnant to neo-Barthians eager to affirm the "plain sense" of Christian language, it is also repugnant to anyone who thinks that most people say what they mean to say most of the time.

I cannot overstate the force of this *reductio ad absurdum* of the dependence thesis. Marshall is not slapping the wrists of modern theologians for failing to read and bow before the latest theories of analytic philosophy regarding justification, interpretation, and truth. He is advancing argu-

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ments, many motivated and guided by contemporary analytic philosophy, to show that successful execution of the dependence thesis entails radically implausible claims about what people mean when they speak and act, whether as Christians or as "modern men." The consequences are devastating. Far from making theology more intellectually respectable, the dependence thesis makes theology utterly implausible, not only as an account of what Christians actually believe, but also as an account of the meaning and import of any beliefs, Christian or non-Christian. No wonder modern theology is now peripheral to contemporary intellectual life.

Since the dependence thesis descends into absurdity, Marshall observes that Christian theologians have no choice but to treat the triune identification of God in Christian language and practice as epistemically primary—or reject these central Christian beliefs as false and get on with finding another line of work. This is not "sectarian" or "fideistic," he argues, but necessary. To think otherwise one must first make assumptions as illogical as the dependence thesis. Thus, none of the usual assumptions of modern theology about the "real intellectual standards" for theology and the dread dangers of mere "dogmatic thinking" turn out to be tenable on Marshall's analysis.

ALTHOUGH IT IS illuminating and powerful, this part of Marshall's book raises important and complicated questions. For example, Christian figural reading of the Old Testament was often attacked as an abuse of the plain sense meaning of the text, and for reasons not dissimilar to Marshall's attack upon the meaning-mongering of modern theology. One positively begs for guidance in understanding how this traditional biblical hermeneutic is related, either positively or negatively, to the

incoherence of modern theology and its insouciant assumptions about meaning. Furthermore, the Neoplatonism favored by the Fathers has important family connections to the post-Kantian idealism that, in one form or another, dominates the approach and vocabulary of modern theology. Again, to the extent that this modern approach and its characteristic assumptions must be rejected, one wishes for instruction in reading the Fathers and properly understanding their use of premodern forms of philosophical idealism.

Marshall, however, does not ask or answer these questions, but presses on toward the question of what truth is. Our theological reflection, however clear-minded about the epistemic primacy of Christian beliefs, is a search for truth. Marshall thus concludes the book with an inquiry into the way in which this search is properly trinitarian.

Marshall offers an account of the Tarski-Davidson (T-D) concept of truth—named after Donald Davidson and mathematician and logician Alfred Tarski—that he thinks can serve as a proper handmaiden to theology. This view is most controversial in its simplicity: the concept of truth should be understood as the ability of sentences to bear truth. Marshall offers reasons for thinking that this is the most plausible way to think about what it means for a sentence to be true (warning: this can get somewhat technical), and in his final chapter begins to show how the T-D position can provide the basis for a Christian account of the concept of truth.

It might seem a stretch to move from the view that sentences bear truth to the idea that truth is identified with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But if Jesus is to be "all truth," then there must be some relation between the natural sense of truth (as explicated in the T-D position) and the supernatural (as revealed in Scripture). Marshall explains this

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connection by delving into the classical trinitarian distinctions: between the unity of divine action and the differentiation of divine roles, between the immanent and economic Trinity, as well as between supernatural knowledge of the Trinity and natural knowledge of creatures.

THIS TRINITARIAN reflection is instructive. Too many theologians put trinitarian theology to nontheological uses: they try to “discover meaning” from trinitarian language, or to “raise up” Christian beliefs to the conceptual level, or to show how friendship or equality or mutuality or reciprocity or other leading ideas are “mediated” by trinitarian language. Marshall, on the other hand, pays attention to what Christians say they believe, treats these beliefs as fundamental, and builds upon them using the rigorous and cogent T-D account of truth. As a consequence, Marshall’s final chapter yields an intellectually disciplined meditation upon the truth of Christian proclamation that depends upon defeasible inferences based upon the plain sense meaning of sentences that Christians actually use.

This approach makes *Trinity and Truth* more than a well-wrought postliberal tract. The concluding chapters differ from the usual neo-Barthian tut-tutting about the terrible errors and untenable assumptions of modern theology. Unlike Barthian forms of modernism, Marshall does not seek to turn “revelation” inside out as the sole source rather than the governing center of true beliefs. Instead, for Marshall, theologians must make informed judgments about which philosophical beliefs are commended by argument. As Marshall rightly notes, only by beginning with truth can theology “radically discipline and change” philosophical claims with central Christian mysteries. After all, disciplining philosophical truth requires more than rejecting its errors and

moving on. Theology, for Marshall, must cultivate and nurture philosophical discernment so that, under the lordship of Christ, our reflection might yield deeper and transfigured truths.

Marshall’s book exemplifies the classical vocation of faith seeking understanding. Such a vocation puts Christian belief first. This requires the humility to submit one’s best ideas to the plain meaning of what is believed and said in worship, and the commitment to investigate what follows when one’s Christian beliefs exert a proper primacy over other beliefs one has good reasons for holding as true. This approach may strike some as a return to “scholasticism,” and others as an advance beyond “postliberalism.” The theological taxonomists can decide. But of one thing I am certain: neither in form or content can such a theology be called modern.

## Singer in the Rain

**A DARWINIAN LEFT: POLITICS, EVOLUTION, AND COOPERATION.** By PETER SINGER. *Yale University Press.* 64 pp. \$9.95.

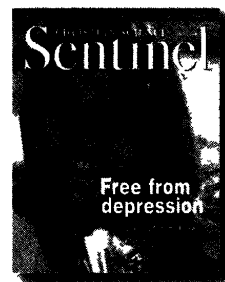
*Reviewed by Nancy Pearcey*

BACK WHEN E. O. Wilson first promoted his newly hatched theory of sociobiology, protesters doused him with a pitcher of water. Since then, sociobiology has come a long way, baby. Dolled up with fancy new monikers like “evolutionary psychology,” it now saunters boldly into the academy claiming to be not only a valid field of investigation but much

NANCY PEARCEY is a fellow of the Discovery Institute’s Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture and managing editor of the journal *Origins and Design*. She is coauthor (with Charles Colson) of *How Now Shall We Live?*

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