

REVIEW ESSAYS

Bruce Marshall

Trinity and Truth (Cambridge University Press, 2000), xiv + 287pp.

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Bruce Marshall's *Trinity and Truth* is a carefully argued rethinking of all three words of its title — Trinity, truth, and the connections between them. It will, I think, set the agenda in the near and perhaps more distant future for those who dare take up its topic. It would be foolhardy to offer either a global summary or critique that would pretend to capture the intricate argument of the book in a review. I would like to pursue a single question Marshall raises and let my questions emerge as I try to describe Marshall's answer to his own question.

The question is this: what is the relationship between the specific christological truth that Jesus Christ is divine truth itself (which Catholics and Evangelicals like Maximus or Aquinas, Luther or Calvin, Barth or Bulgakov would affirm) and more mundane truths like "Snow is white" (over which analytical philosophers like Donald Davidson

puzzle — and to which Catholics and Evangelicals have rarely attended, together)? The singular Jesus who is the divine truth is our entrée to the Trinity; Davidson's mundane truths open up a range of questions about the relationship of such truths to human desires, intentions, beliefs, and language. What are the relationships between such divine and human truths, thus conceived?

Marshall's general answer is clear. At one point he uses Donald MacKinnon's formulation of the rule: Christian beliefs will radically discipline and change, although not annihilate, truths acquired without reference to Christian beliefs (p. 242). One way to read the argument of the book is that it proceeds on two tracks that approach each other more and more as the book proceeds and as Marshall unpacks how a robust trinitarian truth disciplines without annihilating mundane truths.

First, Marshall fixes what he means by "Trinity" through an analysis of the liturgical centrality of the Trinity. The church's eucharistic liturgy is "the primal setting" of trinitarian discourse (p. 15). Here it is clear in the liturgy of the Word and the epikletic eucharist that the triune God invites us to share God's own life as we engage in such

public practices as this word-formed eating and drinking. In our practice of invoking God's name, we identify God as triune. That is, in such eucharistic practice, we identify the risen Jesus "by telling and hearing a story in which he figures as the central character" (p. 30). We identify the Father who creates the world, sends Jesus into the world for our redemption, and perfects or consummates the world in a promised future (p. 38). We identify the Spirit as the one who, on mission from the Father, unites "the assembly or the elements with the Son." This triune God is "of ultimate and universal significance" and therefore communally central and epistemically primary. The standard by which we decide the truth of all other beliefs is this God of prevenient generosity and liberality whose Spirit enables our corresponding response of thanks and epikletic petition.

But there is also a second track to the book. What does it mean to claim (as Christians have) that this trinitarian identification of God, embedded in the liturgical practice of Scripture and Supper, is true? And, presuming we have an answer to that question, how do Christians intelligently decide whether its trinitarian identification of God is true? These are the two main questions about truth that Marshall addresses. They are based on a distinction between "saying what truth is" and "saying what is true" (p. 6), where the former deals with what truth *means* or how we *define* truth and the latter with deciding about our beliefs, including our justifications for them (pp. 6-7; cf. p. 88). Here is where much of modern theology has gone wrong in its trinitarian theology by subjecting trinitarian identification (doctrine) to the discipline of alien doctrines of truth and justification. But Marshall does not proceed by directly criticizing alternative doctrines of the Trinity. He also (for reasons that emerge as the book moves forward) cannot rest content with our simple appeal to our liturgical (or any other political or pietistic) practice. We need to engage in "semantic ascent" (p. 12f.). Marshall does this by radically disci-

plining without annihilating more mundane truths—by showing how the doctrine of the Trinity shapes what we say truth is, how we intelligently decide what is true, and how we connect the two.

He does this, in turn, by tearing down and re-building "five assumptions or implicit theses about epistemic justification and truth which have proven deeply persistent since the late seventeenth century" (p. 50). He dubs these the interiority, foundationalist, epistemic dependence, pragmatist, and correspondence theses. The theses require increasingly complex counter-arguments as one moves from the first to the fifth thesis, from the second to the ninth chapter — and I will not try to replicate this movement here. The arguments against the *interiority* thesis, that Christian beliefs are justified by appeal to inner experiences (p. 50), as well as the *foundationalist* thesis, that justified beliefs must "either be tied in virtue of their meaning to self-evident or incorrigible data or logically grounded in beliefs which are," broaden and clarify George Lindbeck's arguments against experiential-expressivism and cognitive propositionalism.

It is with his arguments against the three further theses that Marshall most substantively advances the debate. The third or *epistemic dependence* thesis claims that "the primary criteria for deciding about the truth of Christian beliefs, at least in part and perhaps as a whole, must not themselves be distinctively Christian" (p. 50). A typical strategy here is to argue or presume that "the meaning of sentences [e.g., about the Trinity] must be determined independently of decisions about the truth of sentences and beliefs [e.g., about the Trinity]" (p. 60). Schleiermacher is Marshall's favorite example, although Bultmann and Rahner and others are also used. Marshall counter-argues, in Davidsonian fashion, that this cannot be consistently done. Instead, meaning, beliefs, and intentions come "as a package" (pp. 92, 217) to which we can only do justice by what Davidson calls a "principle

of charity” that optimizes agreement among us about what sentences are true. Thus, “disagreement in beliefs is only possible against the background of extensive agreement in belief” (p. 94). Instead of holding the Trinity epistemically dependent, we must hold it to be of unrestricted epistemic primacy; that is, given a conflict between this belief and another, we will modify the other belief rather than this trinitarian one (p. 119). But if what justifies beliefs are coherence with other beliefs and if trinitarian doctrine has unrestricted epistemic primacy, how can the belief be justified? “Coherence, of course,” Marshall rightly says, “comes in many varieties” (p. 121). And so “the totality of beliefs which human beings might hold can be seen as forming an open field, ordered around a christological and trinitarian center” where the totality coheres with the center in a multiplicity of ways ranging from identity through necessary implication and “fitness” (*convenientia*) to mere consistency (p. 121). The way we justify a belief with unrestricted epistemic primacy is not only by what we might call its abstract coherence but by its concrete coherence—by its power to “assimilate” any and all alien beliefs, to change without annihilating such beliefs. In still other words, it is to take all thoughts captive to Christ (Ch. 6, pp. 147-79), even difficult thoughts like Davidson’s.

Marshall’s critiques of “revisionist” as well as “radically orthodox” theologies on this score—the former for reducing christological coherence to something else, the latter for a notion of incommensurable ability that denies the principle of charity—will generate much discussion. But about all this I wish to raise a relatively minor question. A robustly trinitarian concept of truth disciplines without annihilating more mundane truths, in this case mundane truths about coherence. Early in the book Marshall says that “[c]loser engagement with the main modern debate about truth and the justification of belief tends not to intensify the conflict

between plausible epistemic standards and central Christian truth claims, but to make it go away” (p. 5). But it seems to me that Marshall’s coherentist view of justification does not so much make the conflict “go away” as relocate it, leaving more detailed arguments to what Barth or Frei called “ad hoc apologetics.”

But why do we need to justify our beliefs by appeal to other beliefs (including justifying our trinitarian beliefs by appeal to those very beliefs’ power to assimilate other beliefs) when we can appeal to a variety of practices of faith? The *pragmatic* thesis is that “Christian beliefs are justified by the communal and individual practices bound up with holding them true” (p. 50). Marshall distinguishes weak, stronger, and maximally strong versions of the pragmatic thesis. A weak version holds that Christian practices are a *necessary condition* for holding Christian beliefs true; a stronger version takes practices as *positive evidence* for holding Christian beliefs true; and a maximally strong version takes practices to be a *sufficient reason* for holding beliefs as true. A trinitarian account of truth disciplines without annihilating a weak version of the pragmatic thesis. Marshall’s counter-argument to the stronger and maximally strong versions builds (as I read it) on his claim that our practices (like our experiences, as he earlier argued the interiority thesis) are belief-dependent. Further, practices do not justify beliefs for “so much practice would support so many different beliefs” that “practice seems unable to narrow the field very far when it comes to deciding which beliefs are true” (p. 189).

But a “weak version” of the pragmatic thesis can still survive since “the presence of practices in which those who hold Christian beliefs ought to engage is a necessary condition for holding Christian beliefs true” (pp. 182, 188). Practice plays a crucial role in determining what a sentence means, and whether a sentence is true depends in part on what it means. Indeed, the Spirit of truth

creates a world *attractive* and *habitable* enough to persuade us to believe. Epistemic justification thus “depends on the mission of the Holy Spirit as well as that of the Son; justified beliefs must not only be christologically coherent, but pneumatologically effective” (p. 5).

This linking of christological coherence and pneumatological practice, it seems to me, is one of the truly innovative moments of this book. We can now see why Marshall could not be satisfied simply with his earlier appeal to the triune God praised and beseeched and identified in eucharistic practice. Marshall also argues that eucharistic disunity is one of the most powerful arguments against the truth of Christian beliefs—and this is a good example of why we need to avoid the maximally strong version of the pragmatic thesis: if practice is a sufficient condition or positive evidence for the truth of Christian belief, a divided church can *only* eat and drink unto its self-condemnation. In any case, here we have another example of how a trinitarian account of truth radically disciplines without annihilating mundane assumptions about truth—in this case, mundane links between truth and practice.

But christological coherence and pneumatological effectiveness are not enough. Recall that Marshall has, from the beginning, distinguished saying “what truth is” from “saying what is true.” The book’s last two chapters build up to the issue of what truth is (the meaning of truth) by a deconstruction and reconstruction of the correspondence thesis. The *correspondence* thesis claims that “the truth of beliefs, including Christian ones, consists in their agreement or correspondence with reality” (p. 50). This is the traditional definition of truth, often identified with Aristotle and Aquinas and borrowed by Christian “realists.” But here too a trinitarian account of truth disciplines without annihilating mundane truths—except that here it is harder to discern the mundane truth of correspondence. That is, Marshall borrows from those like Davidson

who argue that it is folly to define truth. It is not folly because truth is redundant or otherwise inflated, as so-called deflationists argue (e.g., “If snow is white, we do not add much by saying ‘Snow is white’ is true.”). Rather, indefinabilists (as I might call them) argue that we understand truth better than we understand correspondence or any other notion that might be used to define it (p. 216). It is folly not because the definition of truth as correspondence between intellect and reality is false (Marshall, like Davidson, wants a position beyond realism and anti-realism) but because we cannot make clear sense of the notion of beliefs corresponding to reality (pp. 238-41). But correspondence is quite essential to a theology of God’s sharing of God’s own life with us, and our correspondence thereunto, which is itself a Spirit-bestowed share in the correspondence of the Son to the Father (pp. 267-70). This is a final example of the truth of the Trinity radically disciplining without annihilating more mundane ingredients of truth—in this case, the notion of correspondence. Truth is, one final time, under robustly trinitarian theological discipline because it is a gift of our participation in God’s own triune life, including God’s knowledge—the correspondence of Christ to the Father into which the Spirit initiates us.

This is wonderful. But I am not clear exactly what has happened to correspondence among created truths, even as it has been deepened as uncreated (trinitarian) truth. Marshall says that “while there are good theological reasons for thinking precisely of truth as involving a certain kind of correspondence, in abstraction from Christian belief there may be no need—and perhaps no coherent way—to do this” (p. 269). Does this mean that, if we do not abstract from Christian belief, there *may be* a need—perhaps a coherent way—to do this? Or does this mean that trinitarian theologies can, at this point, leave such debates about truth alone? Or, if Marshall’s trinitarian account leads us beyond realism and anti-realism on

truth, does it simply reserve further questions about correspondence for another time and place and book?

Here the two tracks I mentioned above come together. Marshall has found the truth in three philosophical “theories of truth” (coherence, pragmatic, and correspondence) and assimilated (disciplining without destroying) them to trinitarian truth. From early on in the book Marshall contends that “each of the divine persons of the triune God is, in his own way, the truth” (p. 6). For example, with regard to the belief that Jesus is risen, the Father brings about the belief that Jesus is risen by raising Jesus; the Spirit brings about this belief by enabling people to hold this belief true; and the Son Jesus brings it about “by freely presenting himself such that when this belief is held true, it is true” (p. 256). By book’s end Marshall contends that “the coherence of truth, justified belief and willingness to believe finally depends upon the unity of the triune God” (p. 281)—the Spirit of truth who brings about our willingness to believe in the Son who is the truth of the Father. The traditional doctrine of appropriation enables us “to count agents [Father, Son, and Spirit] without counting actions [since the actions of Father and Son and Spirit *ad extra* are undivided]” (p. 254). The unity of truth, justified belief, and our practice (including our willingness to believe) is the unity of Father and Son and Spirit — “a large topic, and one for another day” (p. 281).

Marshall’s book is the best discussion we have of the various strands of truth—what it is, how we know and decide what is true—in robustly trinitarian light. The central claim that trinitarian doctrine disciplines without annihilating our best mundane views of truth provides a framework for Catholics and Evangelicals to think out these issues together. Those who can subject themselves to the radical discipline of this book will eagerly await the “another day” in which he will tackle still other aspects of trinitarian doctrine. □

Anna Wierzbicka

What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 509 pp.

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that a scholar writing a new book on the historical Jesus must be in want of a gimmick. A few years back David Tracy, the Catholic theologian at the University of Chicago, dryly observed that hypotheses about the trial and execution of Jesus are beginning to resemble conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. And for an added fillip of sardonic amusement, one notes that famous movie directors have now joined *both* groups as official kibitzers. Just as Oliver Stone tried to show in his film *JFK* that a homosexual Mafioso had assassinated the President (or whatever), so too the Solons of the Jesus Seminar several years ago invited the Dutch director of the *Robocop* movies to add his blood-and-guts Hollywood expertise to such knotty questions as when Jesus did, and did not, use the term *Abba*, or how many of Matthew’s eight Beatitudes go back to Jesus.

So bizarrely surreal has the search for the historical Jesus become that devout Christians, not to mention honest historians of whatever faith, might be tempted to throw up their hands and declare a pox on the whole guild of New Testament scholars. That such a move would be unwise can be seen in one of the most taken for granted results of historical research: Jesus’ Jewish identity. As the English scholar N. T. Wright puts it so neatly, twentieth-century scholarship “has at least one advantage over its predecessors: it has been realized that Jesus must be understood in his Jewish context.” The gains from this perspective have—as surely nearly every Christian would now



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