

REVIEWS

T. F. TORRANCE AND EASTERN ORTHODOXY: THEOLOGY IN RECONCILIATION

edited by Matthew Baker and Todd Speidell

Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2015. Paper, xi + 361pp.

This book is a remodeled version of the 2013 issue of *Participatio*, but there are some significant changes I will discuss below. The cover of the book features an icon of St. Athanasius whom T. F. Torrance claimed as his favorite theologian—a surprise choice over those generally preferred by the Reformed: Paul, Augustine, Calvin, or Karl Barth. As its title suggests, this book focuses on Torrance’s relationship to Eastern Orthodoxy, and at the center of this relationship is the study of the Church Fathers. Torrance himself claims, “The Greek Fathers remain my main love and I repair to them all the time, and learn from them more than from any other period or set of theologians in Church History” (323).

The book’s layout mirrors the original order of the journal articles and is divided into three parts: “Historical Background and Memoirs,” “Essays Patristic and Constructive,” and “Primary Sources.”

I read this book backwards, starting first with “The Correspondence between T. F. Torrance and Georges Florovsky (1950-1973),” edited by the inimitable Fr. Matthew Baker. Baker, awarded a Ph.D. posthumously by Fordham, provides an excellent introduction to the letters selected for this chapter. Some of the interactions are important than others. The meaty selections like “1,” “14,” and “17” sandwich shorter letters where Torrance seems primarily preoccupied with securing Florovsky’s essays and reviews for inclusion in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Torrance claims at one point: “It looks as if I am the base sort of man who only writes when he wants something!” (305). Nevertheless, it is clear from reading these letters that the men had a fruitful relationship and that Torrance learned a great deal from Florovsky, his senior. The correspondence, over a twenty-year timespan, also demonstrates a progression in Torrance’s engagement with and acceptance of certain aspects of Orthodox theology. As one example, Baker points to the difference between Torrance’s earlier negative



understanding of deification as “extremely un-Hebraic and un-biblical” and Torrance’s later, more positive understanding of participation in God.

As I read the primary sources before turning to the other sections of the book, I was struck by a parenthetical statement made by Torrance in an address about the potential Orthodox contributions to the church in Great Britain. There, Torrance delivers a bombshell: “[The Reformation] called for a recovery of the evangelical doctrine of justification by grace (nowhere better expounded in all the history of theology than by the impeccably orthodox Cyril of Alexandria)” (326)! Matthew Baker clearly anticipated that this provocative statement needed further elucidation, since Torrance himself never elaborated on it. Baker suggested to Donald Fairbairn that he explore this topic further, which he does quite well in his essay which is also included in this book: “Justification in St. Cyril of Alexandria, with Some Implications for Ecumenical Dialogue.” There, Fairbairn shows how Cyril used as synonyms the Greek terms normally translated as “justification” and “sanctification.” While such identification might not seem to seem to be a firm ground to base Orthodox and Reformed dialogue, Fairbairn claims that the primary point of contact for Cyril and Protestants is the “*passive* nature of the Christian’s righteousness” (144) given by God from without, not earned from within.

Baker’s other contributions to this book are also noteworthy. He writes the “Introductory Essay” and conducts an interview with Protopresbyter G. D. Dragas, one of Torrance’s former students. The interview itself is fascinating, and Torrance’s influence on Dragas is clear. At one point, Dragas says of an important moment in his life, “Although I recognize the grace of God in all this, I have no doubt that Torrance was God’s primary agent” (7). To me, the most captivating part of the interview is when Dragas gives a candid description of his ecumenical collaboration with Torrance. Torrance appeared to be full of hope, creativity, and energy when it came to working with the Orthodox, but Dragas points out some of the potential pitfalls Torrance would encounter. Dragas says, “My main problem was his insistence of putting his ‘Athanasian-Cyrrillian axis’ (his term) against the ‘Orthodox Cappadocian deviation’ (his term also)” (14). Dragas found this tendency to pit Father against Father to be quite un-Orthodox (although he accuses Zizioulas of the same in the interview). Dragas closes out the interview by offering a helpful critique of both Torrance’s and Zizioulas’ Trinitarian theology wherein he points out where he believes both are right and where both are wrong.

Of the two new essays added to this collection, one is by Jason Radcliff, author of *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers: A Reformed, Evangelical, and*

Ecumenical Reconstruction of the Patristic Tradition (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), a suggested companion volume to this book being reviewed. In his essay, Radcliff offers a descriptive overview of Torrance's ecumenical work pulled largely from The Thomas F. Torrance Manuscript Collection held by Princeton Theological Seminary (<http://manuscripts.ptsem.edu/collection/223>). Radcliff also seeks to clarify the true targets of Torrance's seeming criticism of certain Church Fathers. Radcliff argues that when Torrance is criticizing the Cappadocians, Gregory Palamas, and Augustine, his real opponents are actually John Zizioulas, Vladimir Lossky, and "Augustinianism" (the reception and radicalization of certain of Augustine's thoughts). Radcliff offers hope that Reformed and Orthodox dialogue could be benefitted through a more precise focus on the Fathers, and not on the Fathers' reception by later thinkers. My only small quibble with this essay is the types Radcliff uses to characterize Reformed and Orthodox reception of the Fathers: Word-based (Christocentric) versus Church-based (synthetic). A more accurate distinction is probably between a narrower-selective approach and a broader-synthetic approach, even though Radcliff claims that both sides have (and should have) their "favorite" Fathers.

The other new essay is "T. F. Torrance and the Christological Realism of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria" by Emmanuel Gergis. In Torrance, Gergis believes he finds an ally in interpreting the theological legacy of Athanasius and Cyril, because he claims that Torrance rejected the dualism associated with the Latin reception of the Council of Chalcedon in favor of a more united (and more truly Alexandrian) view of Christ. In particular, Gergis credits Torrance with providing the proper interpretation of the non-Chalcedonian position on Christ's *mia physis* by reintroducing the works of John Philoponos and disconnecting *physis* from *natura*.

The other articles not examined in this review are still worthy of consideration. Many of them suggest figures to use as fruitful foci for future ecumenical dialogue between Reformed and Orthodox like Maximus the Confessor, Ephrem the Syrian, Mark the Monk, and Dimitru Stanilaoe. Other essays by Asproulis, Tanev, and Nesteruk explore important aspects of Torrance's thought and should not be missed.

T. F. Torrance and Eastern Orthodoxy: Theology in Reconciliation is a tremendous achievement and well worth reading. The book is incredibly layered, with personal remembrances, archival research, secondary studies, and primary sources working together to produce a well-rounded image of Torrance, constructed by those who knew him, by those who studied him, and by his own words. I found myself flipping back and forth among the three sections

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of the book, because they reinforced each other so well. Throughout the book, Torrance is shown to be a powerful theologian whose system of friendships and professional relationships brought together diverse minds to think collectively on common theological problems. It is quite telling that most of the contributors to this book honoring Torrance are Orthodox. If the editors hoped that this publication would encourage readers to better appreciate the great legacy of T. F. Torrance, it is a resounding success. I, for one, look forward to reading more works by Torrance and, of course, the Church Fathers.

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