

ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE FILIOQUE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

edited by Myk Habets

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"Oh East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," or so goes the first line to Rudyard Kipling's famous poem. Some of the most fruitful moments in recent Trinitarian theology have been attempts to ensure that the poem not turn to prophecy. About three decades ago the strategy for the meeting of the ways generally amounted to the academic version of a spiritual travelogue, with theologians exhorting the West to "go East." More recently, the meeting of East and West has occurred in projects like those of Lewis Ayres, Marcus Plested, or Anna Williams, unearthing common modes and manners of theologizing that are inevitably obscured when well-worn historical tropes of standard East-West differences are invoked too readily. While nuanced dissent to some of these projects has come (for example in David Bradshaw's excellent *Aristotle East and West*), they have by most estimates been successful at building new bridges over old divides.

The troll under the ecumenical bridge has remained the *filioque*, nonetheless—or as Edward Siecienski writes in his essay in the present volume, it is "a landmine on the road to unity" (19). The second line of Kipling's poem laments that the divide of East and West will remain "Till earth and sky stand presently at God's judgment seat." With a wry sense of humor, Jaroslav Pelikan has a similarly eschatological pessimism for the *filioque*:

If there is a special circle of the inferno described by Dante reserved for historians of theology, the principle homework assigned to that subdivision of hell or at least the first several eons of eternity may well be the thorough study of all the treatises—in Latin, Greek, Church Slavonic, and various modern languages—devoted to the inquiry: Does the *Holy Spirit* proceed from the Father only, as Eastern Christendom contends, or from both the Father and the Son (*ex Patre Filioque*), as the Latin church teaches?¹

1 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 90.



It is thus not a trivial first moment of praise for Myk Habet's excellent edited volume, *Ecumenical Perspectives on the Filioque for the 21st Century* that its array of thinkers and essays make the *filioque* controversy quite readable and even interesting. Perhaps even more stunning is the fact that, despite the variety of perspectives and traditions on offer here—ranging from Reformed, to Catholic, Orthodox, Free Church, Pentecostal, and others—there is a sort of unity and even clarity among its many parts. Few topics are quite so eager and ready to stumble over themselves and their own technicality and tradition as the *filioque*, but each author has taken pains to be as clear as possible what the terms and differences are, and what is at stake.

Moreover, and unexpectedly, the *filioque* here provides readers an opportunity to see something like real progress in a theological controversy. Noting its own precedents, this volume opens by recounting what Myk Habets calls "small but significant" steps toward the removal of the *filioque* as an obstacle (xiv). This is hesitant language, of course, as "removal of obstacles" is not the same as unity of thought and practice. Nonetheless, these steps include the World Council of Churches' study, *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ: Ecumenical Reflections on the Filioque Controversy* published in 1981, and many other documents such as, "The Greek and Latin Traditions Regarding the Procession of the Spirit" in 1995, and another statement issued in 2003 by the North American Orthodox-Catholic Consultation.

There are also several items of what appear to be material and thematic agreement amongst the many esteemed authors contributing to this volume. For example, while Augustine and the Third Council of Toledo are typically cited as instigating the *filioque*, recent research has shown that the *filioque* was not a systematic point of emphasis in the West until the Carolingian Renaissance (indeed the phrase *a Patre filioque procedit* does not even appear in Augustine's corpus), where the Carolingians "made the *filioque* a cornerstone of their anti-Arian rhetoric" (11). Pope Leo III even commanded the Franks to remove the *filioque*, as he "could not prefer himself to the fathers and alter the ancient creed." Only with the growing power of the Ottonian dynasty was the *filioque* forced upon the Pope, "forever joining the legitimacy of the addition to the pope's right to decide the faith of the universal church" (12). On the other hand, it certainly does appear that Eastern animosity to the *filioque*—legitimate theological points aside—was born as much from lack of easy access to the Patristic witness on the matter, as it was from its partisan insertion into the creed (16 n.46).

Other broader points of agreement (helpfully summarized by David Guretzki's chapter) include: a growing irenicism on all sides, a growing awareness of the

need for scholarly investigation, and a movement from seeing this as a piece of irrevocable and fundamental dogma to one of differing interpretations (for more, cf. 40-61). Materially, the latter (from dogma to interpretation) is justified by increasing clarity on just what is at stake in the formulations of East and West. It is now broadly agreed on all sides, for example, that the West did not intend to include two *archai* in the Godhead by saying the Spirit also proceeds from the son (46, 93), and indeed that Augustine and Aquinas (for example) did not break with the East in considering the Father as *arche*.

There is also clarity in the discussion throughout this volume regarding the fact that the Latin *procedit* is an incredibly misleading translation of the Greek *ekporeusis*. Just as the language barrier created confusion in shifting from *hypostasis* to the Latin *substantia*, so too does the highly specified meaning of *ekporeusis* get lost in the broader Latin of *procedit*, creating inordinate puzzlement and raising the polemical stakes (and poor theology student's blood pressures) unnecessarily. This is not just a recent discovery. Many of the Fathers like Maximus the Confessor were quite aware of this linguistic distinction, and as such would *not* refute the *filioque*, understanding the Latins did not imply more than one principle of origin (21, 51, 86). As Robert Jenson thus concludes, without wanting to gloss the real and actually abiding differences, there is a sense in which "East and West have worked within very different conceptual frameworks and that when this is reckoned with, neither side needs to deny what the other affirms, or affirm what the other denies" (160; cf. 20; 48; 91-92).

That said, however, there is also what appears to be an emerging agreement (though, not consensus) amongst many authors in this volume regarding some of the theological complaints of the East against the *filioque*. As one example, several of the authors (Westerners, no less), take Photius' theological criticism of the *filioque* seriously, and deal with it accordingly. If we are to stick with talking about relations of origin as the sole ground for distinction in the Trinity (and, as we will turn to in a moment, this is a big if for several of the contributors), taking Brannon Ellis' opinion as representative: "when the power of breathing the Spirit in God is what the Son receives *as God* from the Father *as God*, then advocates of the *filioque* are still speaking of the Spirit's origination, but no longer on the level of personal predication" (94; cf. Jenson on 163; and McDowell on 171).

And what of the constructive proposals on offer here? These are as various as the number of essays submitted, nonetheless a few patterns do emerge. For example, though many of the authors take Photius' criticism seriously, as

Kathryn Tanner notes Photius is certainly not the final word, for with his solution that the Spirit only proceeds from the Son in the economy of salvation, "it is . . . not clear from the Eastern (Photinian) view what the [immanent Trinitarian] relations, if any, are between Son and Spirit" (207).

As such, in his fascinating historical essay, Theodoros Alexopolous examines the Eastern conceptual history of the eternal *manifestation* or *shining forth* (*eklampei*) of the Spirit through the Son (65-87). He traces this concept from Athanasius, the Cappadocians, through Maximus Confessor and John Damascene, ultimately to two lesser known theologians: Nikephoros Blemmydes and Gregory of Cyprus. What we have here is an acceptance of the Photian criticism of the *filioque*, and so an attempt to avoid the idea that the Holy Spirit is somehow constituted hypostatically by the Son as well as the Father. And yet, going beyond Photius, both Blemmydes and Gregory of Cyprus want to affirm that the sending of the Spirit by the Son in the economy has some foothold in the eternal divine life itself. Thus in the eternal life of the Trinity the Holy Spirit is not hypostatically constituted by the Son, proceeding (*ekporeusis*) from the Father alone; yet He eternally shines forth God's glory *through* the Son (*eklampei*) (e.g. 78).

Others through the volume do not follow this specific path, but rather invoke a more generous application of *perichoresis* to the eternal *taxis* or order of the Trinitarian relations, in order to account for sensibilities from both cardinal directions. At this point, eye-rolling might be expected. *Perichoresis* has of late reached near-infomercial levels of optimism as a catch-all spackle for Trinitarian home-improvement. But here such skepticism would be unjustified, as it is used with interesting variety and nuance. Thomas Weinandy critiques in its entirety what he terms "Trinitarian sequentialism" (189), and puts forward a concise version of the thesis he previously argued in his book *The Father's Spirit of Sonship*: "The Spirit (of love) proceeds from the father simultaneously to his begetting of the Son. The Spirit does so as the one in whom the Father loving begets his Son, and in so doing the Spirit conforms (persons) the Father to be the *loving* Father of and for the Son he is begetting. Moreover, the Holy Spirit proceeds simultaneously from the Son, and in so doing conforms (persons) the Son to be the *loving* Son of and for the Father who begets Him" (193).

This is, as a formulation, cumbersome and brain twisting (and unlikely to invade the hymnals any time soon). But it does try to account for the Eastern critique while simultaneously keeping the instincts of the West's tradition of the Holy Spirit as the *vinculum caritatis*, binding Father and Son. Kathryn Tanner and Myk Habets likewise invoke *perichoresis*, with Tanner arguing "in sum, Son and Spirit come forth together from the father and return together in

mutually involving ways that bind one to the other" (203), while Habets wishes to emphasize that he is attempting to combine the best insights of the Western "subsistent relation" tradition with the Eastern focus on "*perichoresis*" (218).

In a similar vein, Brannon Ellis invokes John Calvin to ask "what if the age-old divergence between Eastern and Western formulations of the spiration of the Spirit, is due to a significant extent to teasing out variant implications of a shared commitment to a particular explanatory strategy for speaking of the manner of divine procession?" He in turn offers theologians the provocation: "this explanation of the ineffable relation between personal *taxis* and essential unity is precisely what a Calvinian perspective does not grant – and ostensibly on the tradition's own terms" because, according to Ellis, the essence is not communicated but equally possessed by the three: "simply put, to speak of the divine essence *itself* in a relative or comparative sense (as given or received among the persons) is just as inappropriate as making no personal distinctions between Father, Son and Spirit . . ." (90). As such Ellis wants to use Calvin as an inspiration to call both East and West "to deeper *self*-consistency in challenging modes of thought and speech that are in tension" with pro-Nicene Trinitarian grammar (99).

Robert Jenson in turn uses similar logic to critique the traditional limitation of distinction in the Trinity to one of origins (164): "a diagram of the Trinity's constituting relations would then show both active relations of the Triune origin . . . and active relations of the Triune goal" (165), while Paul Molnar highlights T. F. Torrance's insistence that the *monarchia* refers to the entire consubstantial Trinity and not just the Father, thereby circumventing the entire logic that created the opportunity for the problem of the *filioque* in the first place. Habets emphasizes this as well, closing the volume with such a Torrance-inspired suggestion (230).

Certainly the millennia-old question is not resolved here, but we have been given some fascinating food for thought. It is perhaps too trivial to mention what one wishes would have been added to such a rich volume, yet it was curious that without fail Maximus the Confessor was mentioned as a pivotal resource for future dialogue, and yet there was no specific chapter on Maximus, who receives heaps of praise but hardly any sustained analysis. In addition, Yves Congar's bold suggestion that the *filioque* be suppressed in the Western church is also mentioned several times but the broader issue—just what *is* one to do with the respective liturgies that have encoded the controversy and cemented themselves into the living memory of various ecclesia?—is likewise not given any attention.

These nitpicks aside, this is a remarkable volume not only in its clarity and

readability, but by also demonstrating how the *filioque* is related to the entire array of beliefs involved in what it is to be a Christian. Angels and pinheads have no place here—what each contributor has done, and done remarkably well, is to display that the controversies surrounding the *filioque* circulate around how the whole of the scriptural narrative itself is read, how we interpret its agents, and ultimately, how we are drawn into God’s very life. This will no doubt remain a pivotal guidebook on the topic for years to come.

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