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REVIEW OF

PAUL D. MOLNAR, *FREEDOM, NECESSITY, AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: IN CONVERSATION WITH KARL BARTH AND THOMAS F. TORRANCE*

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This book extends Paul Molnar's major writings on divine freedom and the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, and on the work of the Holy Spirit in human knowledge of the Triune God.[1] His earlier studies have deployed the work of Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance against an array of other witnesses in modern theology, beset by a common affliction: a propensity to render the being of God somehow dependent upon creation, historical process, or human experience. The corrective? A fundamental obligation that Barth and Torrance discerned: theologians need to give due account of the ontological primacy of God *in se* over God *pro nobis*.

For Molnar, Barth and Torrance recognized that the Triune God is who he ever is in himself: wholly realized, in need of nothing, subject to no necessity without or

[1] Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002; 2nd edn. 2017); Paul D. Molnar, *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

within. This God simply *is*, in the essential plenitude that is eternally all his own as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He does not give himself his Triune being in electing to be the One who has fellowship with creatures. His commitment of himself to that fellowship, and his entire self-movement to bring it about, is a matter of his loving freedom: his unfathomably generous and majestic resolve to live the fullness of his own life with us rather than without us. What it means to say that God is thus "for us" is specified where the eternally Triune God lovingly enacts in time his antecedent completeness: definitively, in his Son or Word enfleshed, Jesus Christ, made known in the Holy Spirit's power. Absent such an account of the relation between God's immanent being and his economic presence and action, all manner of things go wrong.

The present work brings together a number of substantial essays in further applications of the same logic, and of its highly specific Christological investments. The prevailing concern is this: "everything in theology really looks different when Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, is allowed to be both the *first* and the *final* Word in theology." If Jesus Christ has somehow to have a place found for him in a theology, or to be fitted into a scheme of reflection developed from some other starting-point than the actuality of God's unique disclosure of his Triune perfection in him, it is "already too late" (p. vii). In eight trenchant chapters, Molnar details examples of the kinds of contemporary problems he has in mind, setting out once again his firm convictions as to the better path. Barth and Torrance remain the chief guides. Four chapters reissue or revise material published previously; four are new. A preface outlines the structure of the book and its recurring themes.

The first chapter introduces the overall approach to the treatment of God, freedom, and necessity. Molnar remains strongly concerned to rule out a range of compromises to essential divine freedom, contesting theological claims that might be said in one way or another to present God's acts of creation, reconciliation, and redemption as necessary for the realization, development, or fulfilment of God's being. Key emphases are reiterated from Molnar's earlier work, with a particular slant here towards exposing some of the difficulties that ensue when eternal relations are collapsed without remainder into temporal works. Divine action *ad extra* is loving, gracious, and sovereignly effective precisely because it is the action of the One who is complete in the essential relations of his own love. To say that God's outward turn is free and unconstrained is not to say that it is arbitrary or capricious, or that there is some other God lurking behind the God who thus makes himself known; it is to insist that these actions are what they are inasmuch as they are grounded in the being of the God who is beyond constitution or augmentation in or through them. It is *this* One, in the fathomless goodness of his eternal plenitude, who commits himself to fellowship with us.

The alternative, Molnar contends, is a God in some sort of need – and a series of theological disasters. Certain ways of characterizing the mature (as distinct from earlier) Barth's putative legacies on the logical relationship of the Trinity and election have been heavily challenged in Molnar's work already; such approaches are referenced here once again as disregarding Barth's enduring emphases on the primordial completeness of the eternally Triune God whose decisive history with us is the enactment of grace. For Molnar, the proposal that, logically speaking, God first determines his being as Triune in determining to be God with and for us in Jesus Christ is an instance of what goes awry when the incarnation of the eternal Son in time is seen not as a movement of loving freedom but as some kind of necessity for the Triune God to *be* the Triune God. Eternal divine plenitude is eroded; a dependent deity in one sense or another comes into view; contrary to the appearances of a case that majors on the need to avoid speculation on divinity in detachment from Jesus Christ, Christology itself is in fact attenuated. Other examples of errors in regard to God and necessity are also explored in the chapter: panentheisms of one form or another; misconstruals of the nature of divine passibility as it is in fact enacted, in redemptive as distinct from self-jeopardizing capacity in the life, death, and resurrection of the incarnate Son; attempts to posit a dialectical relation of freedom and necessity in God which appeal to an analogy between divine and creaturely being in representation of divine love – and thus obscure the glory of the reality that it is the God who is beyond conceivable lack in his own love who in love creates and saves.

The second essay considers Barth in relation to Roman Catholic theology. Molnar focuses on two prominent exemplars of post-Vatican II approaches, Walter Kasper and Elizabeth Johnson. Both consciously work out their positions in light of

Karl Rahner's arguments on the need to move beyond a neoscholastic theology and its alleged tendencies towards extrinsicism. Kasper for his part is critical of aspects of Rahner's theology; Johnson remains fairly heavily reliant on Rahner's transcendental method in her articulation of a feminist theology of experience in the reading of scripture and tradition. For Molnar, both still trade on assumptions essentially at odds with Barth's account of revelation and the immanent Trinity. In their differing ways, Kasper and Johnson continue to work with a version of the *analogia entis* that remains irreducibly problematic on Barth's terms; fidelity to revelation demands attention to Jesus Christ as both first and final Word.

Natural theology is also the subject of the third chapter. Here, in a revised version of an article first published in *Participatio*,[2] Molnar takes issue with Torrance's so-called "new natural theology," the proposed methods of which he sees as in tension with Torrance's general strong commitment, after Barth, to a theology of revelation in Christ. What Torrance commended at large was not a natural theology but a theology of reconciled human nature. Where Torrance spoke of a version of a theology that might serve as "infrastructure" or "intrastructure" of revealed theology, he did so not in advancement of a coherent synthesis of natural and revealed theology but in inconsistency with his own reasoning elsewhere on revelation as a matter of grace from start to finish, and as such specifiable only as found in Christ by the Spirit's action. Molnar is critical of attempts to read "new natural theology" as a natural theology in any conventional sense of that term, albeit it contained elements of such a thing, not least in its references to ostensible analogies between the relationship of natural and revealed theology and the relationship of geometry and physics. Molnar contends that Torrance's scientific theology at large assuredly did not commend an account in which pre-understandings of the Triune God specifically might somehow be had through reflection on the world. Barth himself closed the door to such notions more consistently, but Torrance also frequently stressed that it was only within the sphere of God's new creation, as reconciled in the person and work of the one mediator, Jesus Christ, that reliable knowledge of the Triune God could be found.

[2] Supplemental volume 4 (2018): 148–83.

The fourth essay is a substantial new piece, which sets Torrance directly in dialogue with Rahner on the nature of knowledge. Rahner advocates, on the basis of a philosophy of religion, an unthematic or non-conceptual knowledge of God as antecedent to reflection, and thus speaks of experience of the "nameless" and of anonymous Christianity. Torrance's approach locates itself in the realm of interruptive grace as encountered in the incarnate Word, and thus confesses that mystery is disclosed in its own revolutionary and specific terms. Molnar argues that Torrance duly recognized that only through revelatory divine action could God be rightly as opposed to falsely apprehended. Such action involves, immediately and radically, a granting of conceptual knowledge and delighted confession. Its consequence is creaturely encounter with ultimate reality: being united to Christ by the Spirit through faith, and with Christ approaching the Father.

Chapter five presents a critique of the concerns of liberation theologians to argue from human experiences of liberation to knowledge of God. For Molnar, there can be no legitimate movement from human struggles for freedom or the pursuit of liberating praxis as such to knowledge of the God who truly liberates. In the gospel we are directed by the Spirit to the reality of reconciliation in Christ, in whom alone true freedom has been established in comprehensive terms. Discovering that we are in Christ liberated from enmity with God by God himself, and thus freed both to love God and to love our neighbours and fight against all that oppresses them, we are summoned to live a freedom that cannot be generated by human initiative or correlated with any merely human programme of political, social, or economic liberation, howsoever worthy such an endeavour may appear in itself. Compromises to the particularity of the freedom decisively secured in Christ – which has indeed established serious responsibilities for Christian agents in the world – are anthropocentric in their cast; Jesus becomes but a Christian cipher for a salvation towards which people may evidently aspire to work along all kinds of paths. If "fight against oppression is the starting point or locus for theological reflection, then theology becomes an ideology employed to advance whatever agenda is considered necessary to attain that end" (p. 165). Efforts to overcome a polarity between a theology of the Word and an account of divine presence established upon human emancipatory experiences typically do not give due place to Jesus himself as the only true liberator and light of the world, whose unique achievement defines and impels right efforts to free others from the effects of structural oppression. Deliverance from sin and its dire effects within and between us involves deliverance from our own efforts at liberation as substitute for the irreducible person and work of the Christ.

The sixth essay is another new one, on an ever-important question: the nature of language for God. Molnar deploys Torrance's contrast of "disclosure" and "picturing" (or "picture") models: is God to be named in accordance with his self-unveiling, or on the basis of human experiences of relationality? Needless to say, Molnar contends vigorously for the first approach as determinative of faithful theological speech, and presents it in strong antithesis to the arguments of feminist theologians who propose changes to classical trinitarian language. Central to his critique of revisionist arguments and their appraisals of the connections between gender, power, doctrine, and liturgy is a Torrancean construal of conversion. To be a new creation in Christ is to be turned away from ourselves – whoever we are – in consequence of an achievement that has secured equality and freedom for all. The alternative to biblical and credal language for the God of the gospel, Molnar reasons, is not freedom: it is the bondage of idolatrous imagination, according to which God is either fashioned after our image or elusive of our knowledge entirely, an abstract or amorphous something rather than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, known in the Holy Spirit's power. The God who in reconciling and redemptive action makes known that he eternally subsists as God in these specific relations in himself is the One who has in fact set us free for transformed human relationships, and whose evangel condemns all our falsehoods, including all forms of abuse or subordination of women by men in the church. The God who in freedom has made himself known as he truly is stands in genuinely liberating contrast to an ambiguously subjective divinity, characterized only by the dictates of human projection and all its misapprehensions of where human freedom, dignity, equality, and empowerment are properly to be found.

An earlier study of Molnar's examined Torrance's claims that a doctrine of universalism was a "menace to the gospel."[3] For Torrance, while it might be hoped

[3] Paul D. Molnar, "Thomas F. Torrance and the Problem of Universalism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68 (2015): 154–86.

that God would save everyone in the end, any statement that he definitely will is a pernicious attempt to determine what God must do for us – a denial of God's sovereign freedom in salvation and his unique authority to judge all aright. Chapter seven extends that discussion in critical engagement of a recent strong case for universal salvation by David Bentley Hart. Molnar argues that Hart's insistence on a universalist understanding of the Christian message as the only true account of its logic[4] violates the principles that Torrance adduced as biblically important. Hart's case relies on an understanding of a properly functioning moral intelligence governed not by the gospel but by a version of natural theology. Once again, the matter of divine freedom seems to be reduced to terms imposed by unregenerate reason rather than seen in light of an account of sin, evil, judgement, and salvation defined, as they must be, only in Christ. For Molnar, Torrance was far more careful.

The final chapter considers whether Christians worship the same God as those from other Abrahamic faiths. The question is approached via Barth's critique of religion and his argument that it is in Jesus Christ alone and his action to justify that any claim to truth is established: the basis of true belief can only be the electing grace and covenant fidelity of God as enacted in his reconciliation of the world to himself in Christ, a reality by which Christian religion as well as other religions stands judged. The truth of Christianity is in no way grounded in Christians but in Christ himself. Molnar prosecutes his case through critical dialogue with the views of a representative of each of the three faiths: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. His argument is that Muslims, Jews, and Christians are not united by their attachment to monotheism: they are in fact divided by it. This is so not only because the nature of monotheism is differently appraised by each but also because no religious commitment as such can so unite. Only God can tell us the true identity of his being; in doing so uniquely in Christ he has shown that Christians no less than Jews and Muslims are dependent entirely on the grace of God for salvation. Christians cannot affirm oneness in general terms as a basis for their proper relations with Jews or Muslims, nor can they locate a common truth in shared investments in ethical or religious practices. The basis for solidarity is revelation – the gospel of the Triune God who reconciles – not religion.

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[4] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

Molnar's knowledge of both Barth and Torrance is considerable, and he pursues their core dogmatic commitments with clarity and passion. His vigorous style once again bears evident debts to his heroes: there is maximal presentation of positions, great fondness for strong contrasts, a pervasive interest in tracing out the directions in which fundamental principles lead. The accents in the reading of Barth are undoubtedly reflective of Torrance's own, and there are some obvious sympathies with Torrance's ways of characterizing Western historical theology at large. As a collection of essays rather than a monograph, the book evinces a degree of internal repetition, but in that the author's major concerns are undeniably clear. It serves to make its case by way of a cumulative set of studies on the dangers of not taking the route that Barth and Torrance did in fidelity to scripture and creed.

Those familiar with Molnar's work will recognize a good number of the targets. There are also some new ones: Brandon Gallaher's study of freedom and necessity in modern theology in chapter 1;[5] Rubén Rosario Rodríguez' case for a comparative theological analysis of the Spirit's presence in liberating praxis in chapter 5;[6] Hart's essay on universalism in chapter 7. Examples drawn from Roman Catholic theologians deeply invested in correlationist and symbolic renditions of doctrine remain an obvious focus, and assessment of Rahner's various legacies again looms large; but Molnar also engages in strong critiques of Protestant or Orthodox approaches that he finds wanting. He sees a properly functioning Christology as lacking across confessional boundaries, and is ready to challenge Reformed thinkers as well as others who seem not to have learned from Barth and Torrance as they might. The illustrations across the board are by definition selective (perhaps most obviously in the treatment of Barth vis-à-vis Roman Catholic theology in chapter 2), but their range is also sufficient to show that a fair few of the critical questions with which Barth and Torrance reckoned can hardly be domesticated as the theological issues of a generation or two ago: they continue to call for careful thought in light of further instantiations of the themes.

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[5] Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[6] Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel: Beyond the Theologies of Word and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

For those who might be tempted to suppose Molnar thinks neither Barth nor Torrance ever got anything much wrong, chapter 3 shows he is quite willing to identify tensions in Torrance's thought (just as elsewhere he has, for example, criticized the mature Barth's reasoning in comparison with Torrance's on a due theological articulation of the obedience of the Son).[7] In reality, valuable contributions are again made to the ongoing scholarly assessment of both figures. Molnar's interaction with Alexander Irving's reading of Torrance's "new" natural theology is one instance, as is also Molnar's consideration of Alister McGrath's use of Torrance in the construction of a contemporary natural theology. In the latter case especially, Molnar's comments tender a contribution to a much larger critical conversation on Torrance's representations of the relationship of theology and the natural sciences, and on the helpfulness or otherwise of those representations for the depiction of theology's engagements with other academic disciplines more broadly, particularly where the interests of such engagements may be framed in strongly apologetic terms.

By addressing themes of obvious pertinence for theology and church – the nature of religious experience; the status of doctrine; the use of language in worship; what it means to know and proclaim freedom in Christ; the relationship of Christianity to other faiths; the claim that a God who is love, or a fellowship of relations, must as such be envisioned in accordance with our understanding of such things, or that he must surely save us all in the end – Molnar shows that close attention to the dogmatics of Trinity and Christology ought to be no diversion from practical questions of everyday faith, but the very context in which those issues can be responsibly appraised. His proposal is that only a theology submissive to the tutelage of the gospel set forth in scripture and confessed in creed *can*, in reality, address them well.

Running through the whole text is an impassioned soteriological argument. For Molnar, those who envisage theological epistemology and its entailments in other terms have yet to ponder the weight of sin, and how enduringly perilous the lure of self-justification. This is, at heart, the recurrent problem for him in a great many of the theologies with which he takes issue: in closely associating the content

[7] See, for example, Molnar, *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, ch. 7.

of thought about God to that which is in one way or another available to us (however variously or vaguely) in our own experiences of creatureliness, or nameable merely as felt stimulus to the better enactment of their conditions, theologians appear repeatedly to postulate a divinity malleable to the imperatives of creaturely self-will. They thus ignore a fundamental reality. Sinners are not dynamically structured toward the Triune God made known in Jesus Christ: they are at enmity with him. The chief expression of their wickedness is their tendency to establish idols in his place, whether those generated by appealing visions of moral idealism or emblematized in such mobile symbols or negativities as may be attached to an elusive mystery. The enormity of that plight is itself made known only in Christ; it is in recognizing him as the one who frees from the bondage of self-will and its delusions that otherwise lost and confused fashioners of falsehoods discover the truth and what it means to live it out in his Spirit's power. Only in reconciling and transformative encounter with the personal relations that eternally subsist within the Godhead – in being drawn into the fellowship of the eternal Trinity in wondrous mercy – do they find out what is actually the case about God, and about their proper ends as his redeemed creatures and adopted children. Only thus do they learn to speak to him and of him as they ought.

Molnar is concerned, as his heroes often were, to expose and dismantle flimsy theological edifices. Those inclined to assume – not always on the basis of much primary reading – that Barth is best pigeon-holed (and thus largely ignored) as patron saint of a dodgy, atavistic cult called "neo-orthodoxy," or at any rate of an especially noisy subsect of it called "Barthianism," Torrance one of its high priests, will doubtless find much of the reasoning a trial. It is fair to say that an exposition of divine freedom and creaturely knowledge of God in Jesus Christ could well draw deeply on the insights of Barth or Torrance without remaining quite so much in their shadow; whether that might soften the challenges for some such readers I cannot rightly say. But the work is in any event pitched as a "conversation" with these two sources in particular, and as an invitation to heed some important expressions of their wisdom, counter-cultural as it may be. In effect, Molnar says, we ignore the substance of their arguments at our peril, and the evidences of that are clear.

Perhaps the material collected does risk a certain mixture: in part a reading of Barth and Torrance as strong contrast to a range of other approaches in theology and their wide contemporary impacts; in part a *Sachkritik* of possible tensions or inconsistencies in Barth's and Torrance's thought (Torrance's more than Barth's here); in part a set of arguments about how Barth and Torrance might or might not be legitimately invoked in the interests of a strategy such as a reconceived natural theology; in part an appeal to the beauty of a joyful confession of Jesus Christ as first and last word. Such may be a natural consequence of an assemblage of occasional essays with other pieces. The overall effect is nevertheless a weighty set of reflections on theological method and the places to which it may take us.

A slightly less energized or fulsome treatment of sheer differences, a more leisurely exposition of the positive realities, and a somewhat wider lens on the possible philosophical and cultural roots of the ideas concerning freedom, necessity, and knowledge to which Barth's and Torrance's dogmatics stand as corrective might at times be welcome. But sharp as the polemic can be, lengthy the argumentation and evidence, these studies are undoubtedly aimed at constructive ends: at theology's due articulation of great good news concerning the God who loves in freedom and in love really does come to us in Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega of all our true confession. Not everyone with general sympathies for Molnar's essential contentions would necessarily seek to frame all of the issues just as he does; there are of course questions also that Reformed theologians themselves might legitimately wish to ask about aspects of both of the Reformed theologies here celebrated so warmly by a Catholic enthusiast. But the soteriological refrain in particular that Molnar brings out in respect of the knowledge of the Triune God of the gospel is surely of immense importance; its general inflection in these chapters ought to be congenial to many an Augustinian.

The book is vintage Molnar: a collection of astute exercises on matters about which he has thought long and hard, and on which he shares a compelling theological vision with considerable skill and panache, tracing out its implications in further areas of immediate relevance for contemporary Christian consideration. The volume will be read with appreciation by all who have valued his work on Barth and Torrance, and with profit by anyone with a concern for the vital connections between a robustly theological theology and the practices of faith in today’s world. It fully deserves to be pondered also by those who have yet to reckon in seriousness with the issues of enduring significance it ventures determinedly to address.