

READING REVIEW I: “Gender in the Trinity” – David T. Williams (Jared Shaw)

Summary of the Text

Of the Trinitarian doctrine’s practical and theological implications, none is perhaps as controversial as those of the contemporary gender debate. This is the central subject of David T. Williams’ article. In essence, Williams’ main concern is the oppression of women that has frequently been derived from the doctrine of the Trinity. He contends that this unwanted side effect stems in part from the fact that each person of the Trinity has been uncritically described as male, which has led to the subordination of women within Christian theology and practice. Rather than describe the persons of the Trinity as female, Williams suggests an analogy of the Trinity as the “basic human unit, the family.”¹ However, Williams notes the apparent pitfall; even this family analogy can result in the subordination of women. Consequently, Williams couples this analogy closely with the doctrine of perichoresis. In this way, “each person draws life from, and depends on the others, without loss of distinction.”² In this way, Williams proposes an analogy that conveys a sexual balance whilst avoiding hierarchal insinuations.

Critical Evaluation

Williams’ critique of historical male understandings toward the Trinity appears quite sound. Historically speaking, it appears evident that theologians have uncritically ignored the “exclusively male imagery of God” that has been used concerning the Trinity.³ Rosemary Ruether, who published the first feminist systematic theology, proposed that classical theology has always been grounded in male experience, to the neglect of any femininity.⁴ In addition, Elizabeth Johnson surmises that since the male characteristics assigned to God were entirely harmonious with the patriarchal composition of both state

¹ Williams, D. T., “Gender in the Trinity,” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 106 (2000): 51-57, p. 54.

² Williams, D. T., “Gender in the Trinity,” p. 55.

³ Fox, P., “The Trinity as Transforming Symbol: Exploring the Trinitarian Theology of Two Roman Catholic Feminist Theologians” in *Pacifica* 7 (1994): 273-294, p. 278.

⁴ Malone, M. T., *Women and Christianity, Volume Three: From the Reformation to the 21st Century* (Dublin: The Columbia Press, 2003), p. 235.

and church, they were adopted and defended with confidence without question or alternative.⁵

In response, Williams has rejected the reaction of some to ascribe female qualities to the Trinity. For example, Williams appeals to the lack of biblical evidence for a feminine Holy Spirit, insisting that a feminine Holy Spirit alone does not result in a sexual balance within the Trinity anyhow.⁶ It is perhaps as a direct consequence of this conclusion that Williams has decided upon a distinctly dissimilar analogy concerning the Trinity.

However, this should not be thought of as the only legitimate reaction. Elizabeth Johnson endeavours to counter-balance the problematic male-restrictedness of the Triune God by describing God instead with direct femininity.⁷ There is strength to this approach that Williams' analogy lacks. Since it quite directly opposes the male dominance inherent to the historical trinity, it appears more powerful to achieve the sexual balance desired by feminist theologians.⁸

Williams' notion of the family unit as a better analogy for the trinity has both strengths and weaknesses. Whether or not it actually achieves a sexual balance is a matter of perspective. A three-person family (father, mother and son) does little in the attempt to be

⁵ Fox, P. "The Trinity as Transforming Symbol," p. 279.

⁶ The Holy Spirit has doubtless received the most attention. Many have suggested that the Holy Spirit be portrayed and understood as feminine due to parallels with the Old Testament word "hochmah" (Sophia, Wisdom) and the maternal characteristics of the Holy Spirit, as conveyed in the New Testament. Also frequently proposed is an understanding of the first person of the Trinity as 'mother.' Williams critiques this understanding by appealing to the profound differences between a mother's relationship to her child and that of a father. Further, while the masculinity of the historical Jesus is not often doubted, his divine nature is frequently discussed and considered. Williams questions whether Jesus' apparent male gender should be attributed to His divine nature, or whether the second person of the trinity ought transcend such designations. See Williams, D. T., "Gender in the Trinity," pp 51-53.

⁷ It should be made clear that unlike Williams, Johnson appeals to certain feminine terms used in the Bible to describe God, particularly relying on the notion of Sophia, Wisdom personified. Johnson draws many parallels between Sophia and the redeeming God of the Bible, proposing what some have termed a "wisdom Christology." Thus Johnson asserts the Mother-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia and Spirit-Sophia. See Fox, P. "The Trinity as Transforming Symbol," pp. 280-281.

Johnson should not be thought of as the originator of Wisdom Christology. It is actually thought of as the earliest form of incarnation theology and some have found it a minor theme in the church fathers. See Wells, H. G., "Trinitarian Feminism: Elizabeth Johnson's Wisdom Christology" in *Theology Today* 52. 3 (1995): 330-337, p. 332.

⁸ Since the current lack of balance is so extensive, feminine ascriptions appear advantageous. While in theory it might thus be possible for the imbalance to skew in the opposite direction, such a notion appears unrealistic at this time, and the need for change at the present ought be understood as urgent.

relevant to the contemporary notion of family. Indeed, today's meaning of family is relative to the cultural values and norms of differing nations and societies. Thus, Williams is correct in asserting that "the basic human unit, the family" can still result in the subordination of women. Other feminist theologians such as Johnson have suggested that the trinity finds its best illustration in genuine human friendship.⁹ This proposal, which seems to echo the theology of Jürgen Moltmann,¹⁰ might succeed to an extent in accommodating further diversity. It does not, however, solve the issue; William's proposal is indeed valid.

Williams has not left the family analogy without further support. He appeals to the doctrine of perichoresis to guard against the potential subordination of his model. Grenz describes this term as the "interrelation, partnership, and mutual dependence of the Trinitarian members."¹¹ As perhaps the essential basis of social Trinitarian theologies, it appears to dismiss hierarchy, both in God's economy and essence.¹² Some have suggested that all social explanations toward the trinity are inappropriate, inferring an inaccurate form of plurality in the Godhead.¹³ Despite such critiques, Williams' union of the family unit analogy with the doctrine of perichoresis succeeds to an extent in realizing a sexual balance.

In support of a non-hierarchical Trinity, Williams briefly asserts that while there is certain subservience within the economic Trinity, there is no need to read back such subordination into God's essence.¹⁴ While observing the approach of Rahner, who proposed the economic and immanent ought be equated, Williams opts for distinction between the two. This stands in contrast to the theology of Grudem and others, who

⁹ Fox, P. "The Trinity as Transforming Symbol," p. 281.

¹⁰ McDougall, J. A., "The Return of Trinitarian Praxis? Moltmann on the Trinity and the Christian Life" in *The Journal of Religion* 83. 2 (2003): 177-203, p. 196.

¹¹ Grenz, S. J., *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 68.

¹² Grenz directly asserts that perichoresis ought be ascribed and related to both the economic and ontological trinities. See Grenz, S. J., *Theology for the Community of God*, p. 68.

¹³ Richardson, C. R. D., "The Doctrine of the Trinity: Its Development, Difficulties and Value" in *The Harvard Theological Review* 36. 2 (1943): 109-134, p. 129.

¹⁴ Williams, D. T., "Gender in the Trinity," p. 55.

propose the eternal subordination of the Son.¹⁵ There is possibility of contradiction in Williams' argument here. Whilst Williams directly dismisses hierarchical analogies concerning the Trinity, he has allowed the potentiality of ascribing the subordination of women to men *in role* with such remarks. If there is any truth to the thoughts of Kevin Giles, then a certain ontological inferiority is involved in the functional subordination of women.¹⁶ It certainly appears that the two cannot be separated so easily. Thus, Williams' attempt to bifurcate the economic and immanent subordination within the trinity does not necessarily benefit his argument; it may in fact prohibit it.

Further, central to Williams' thinking is two ideas: the limits of analogy and the mystery of God. Both notions are only briefly stressed, but have strong implications. Williams appears to agree with Fox, who proposes that the analogy of Father, Son and Holy Spirit was never meant to convey literal understandings concerning God's nature. Instead, it was deployed in order to convey the association of relationship with God.¹⁷ This notion makes more sense of the mystery associated with God, an important concept expressed by the likes of John Calvin¹⁸ and Thomas Aquinas.¹⁹ Fox notes that this incomprehensibility has been frequently expressed in both Scripture and later tradition.²⁰ Therefore, the problem with the theology of Grudem and others is that "the paternal metaphor of God has been literalized, given ontological significance, used exclusively, and thus functions to legitimate patriarchy."²¹ This is perhaps the most significant aspect of Williams' argument, and that of Christian feminists in general.

¹⁵ For Grudem's most comprehensive treatment of the issue, see Grudem, W., *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), pp. 406-435.

¹⁶ Giles, K., "The Subordination of Christ and the Subordination of Women" in Pierce, R. W., Groothuis, R. M. (Editors) & Fee, G. F. (Contributing Editor), *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementary without Hierarchy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 338.

¹⁷ Fox, P. "The Trinity as Transforming Symbol," p. 278.

¹⁸ Calvin asserted, "By person, then, I mean a subsistence in the Divine essence, - a subsistence which, while related to the other two, is distinguished from them by incommunicable properties." See Calvin, J. (translated by H. Beveridge), *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 1.13.6, p. 114.

¹⁹ Aquinas remarked, "Since God is outside of all classes and categories and beyond the possibility of being imagined or conceived, God is positively misrepresented if any one image is used exclusively or thought to be adequate." Quoted in Wells, H. G., "Trinitarian Feminism," p. 333.

²⁰ Fox, P. "The Trinity as Transforming Symbol," p. 278.

²¹ Hilker, M. C., "Feminist Theology - Key Religious Symbols: Christ and God" in *Theological Studies* 56. 2 (1995): 341-349, p. 344.

There is one last critique that is often made of feminist theologies, and is of relevance here. Critics often propose that feminist theologies repeatedly find their starting point in feminism and female experience, instead of commencing from Scripture.²² If this is true, then Harold G. Wells is correct to place feminist theology within the sphere of contextual theology, “Which insists that theology must address, and be addressed by, the realities of the ‘context.’”²³ Moreover, Fox notes that many advocates of feminist theology appear to start with their feministic ideals and then turn to the trinity for support.²⁴ It should not be surprising that fundamentalist evangelicals view this as a mistake. Williams appears to be conscious of this concept but utilises it against her opponents, saying,

The danger is to take the relationship in a human marriage, and because so often the woman is in fact subordinate to the husband, seeing inherent subordination, Arianism, in the Trinity. It is always questionable to work in this way, illegitimate to argue the nature of the infinite from the finite.²⁵

However, Williams’ argument can be turned against her. It might be said that the danger is to take the relationship in a human marriage, and because so often equality is practiced between the woman and her husband, seeing inherent equality in the Trinity.²⁶ Thus, Williams’ may in fact understand the Trinity from her own experience. Whether this is indeed inappropriate must come down to one’s theological method. However, perhaps at the root of the issue is Christian feminists’ view of the Bible. Whereas evangelicals have often described the Bible as the Word of God, Christian Feminists such as Williams might be working from a newer view on Biblical authority. This view, though diverse in

²² Hilkert, M. C., “Feminist Theology,” p. 344.

²³ Wells, H. G., “Trinitarian Feminism,” p. 330.

²⁴ Fox, P. “The Trinity as Transforming Symbol,” p. 278.

²⁵ Williams, D. T., “Gender in the Trinity,” p. 57.

²⁶ That a person in our contemporary context could see such egalitarianism practiced is certainly possible. For one, there has been obvious growth and development both in the number of ordained female clergy and the extent to which feminist concerns have been incorporated into seminary life and curricula over the last few decades. See Steiner-Aeschliman, S. & Mauss, A. L., “The Impact of Feminism and Religious Involvement on Sentiment Toward God” in *Review of Religious Research* 37. 2 (1996): 248-259, p. 248. Further, feminist advocates such as S. K. Gallagher and R. W. Price note a developing inconsistency in their opponent’s application of the male-dominant hierarchy. While such ideals are held in theory, they often advocate egalitarianism in practice. See Gallagher, S. K., “The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism” in *Sociology of religion* 65.3 (2004): 215-237, pp. 228-233; & Price, R. W., “Contemporary Evangelicals for Gender Equality” in Pierce, R. W., Groothuis, R. M. (Editors) & Fee, G. F. (Contributing Editor), *Discovering Biblical Equality*, p. 67.

particulars, is elucidated by James Parkes, “that the Bible describes the *activity of God*, as interpreted by men who with their whole heart believed in him.”²⁷ Within this understanding, Scripture is still authoritative, but understood in light of the subjectivity of those who wrote it.²⁸ This should not be uncritically seen as inappropriate.

Conclusion

In sum, Williams’ discussion of the trinity in relation to Christian feminism is thought provoking to say the least. It is of increasing relevance toward contemporary Christians grappling with the issues of gender and subordination. As a believer, the doctrine of the Trinity is of the utmost importance to my personal faith. The relationship between this doctrine and gender equality has been significant as I continue seeking truth in regards to my personal relationship(s) and that of my church life. In my judgment, Williams’ questioning of male-dominant hierarchal structure within Christianity is both right and required. His overall contention is both rational and refreshing.

²⁷ Parkes, J., “The Bible, the World, and the Trinity” in *Journal of Bible and Religion* 33.1 (1965): 5-16, p. 5 (italics his).

²⁸ Perhaps contextual theologies in general have been birthed from such views.