REVIEW ESSAY

Paul D. Molnar, *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology*
Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015, 448 pp.

Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*
2nd edition (London and New York: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2017), xxi + 591 pp.

The first edition of Paul Molnar's *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, published by T. & T. Clark in 2002, was one of the most important books in a generation in trinitarian theology. Its essential case, set forth with clarity and passion, was simple. The doctrine of the immanent Trinity, Molnar argued, is not some flight of theological speculation, the recherché projection of those who presume to know too much about divinity: it is fundamental to the dogmatic exposition of the gospel. If theology's starting point lies, as it must, with God's willingness to be known, at the heart of its confession lies the claim that God is – primordially, eternally, on the 'inside', as it were – the one he shows himself to be: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is encountered as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the economy of his self-disclosure in time, his 'outward' works of creation and redemption. But what occurs in the economy is unveiling of eternal mystery: the God who reveals himself is *already* Father, Son and Holy Spirit before the foundation of the world. The temporal acts which effect his will for fellowship with creatures derive from the fathomless, eternally communicated richness of his life in himself.

Crucially, Molnar insisted, the God who makes himself known is eternally *free* – entirely self-existent and self-sufficient as the God he ever is, unconditioned in his being by anything external to him. The self-revealing God is wholly realized in the relations in which his triune life eternally consists; he stands in need of

no history with us in order to be who he is. The God who turns himself towards us does not become triune in or for that turn, nor can his essential triunity be collapsed into its dramatic manifestation, as though the high eternal One were only Father, Son and Holy Spirit in or with his creatures' temporal story. And precisely this is gospel: it is *because* God is utterly blessed and complete in his own relational life that his dealings with us are so wondrous. The antecedent freedom of the triune One's essential being is no abstract transcendence: it is the ground of all our blessing.

Central to Molnar's reasoning in his 2002 book was the contention that modern theology has – to put it mildly – not done a great job of expressing this matter. In some cases, the results of that failure have just been glaring. There have been theologies in which some species of generic theism has assumed priority over the evangel's (far more radical) identification of the character of the God who creates and saves; theologies in which religious experience has been taken to mean that all doctrinal claims are but exercises in imaginative construction, some fluid technology of the symbol regulated only by our personal journeys; theologies in which the evident limitations – the dangers – of such poetics have generated frank agnosticism as to who or what (or if) God really is independently of our concepts. Enough said. In other cases, the instincts at least have seemed much better. Revelation has mattered. Speech about God, it has been recognized, is not virtuoso speculation, with all its perils: the God of Christian confession is indeed spoken of in faith on the basis of his self-identification; that self-identification requires us to say that God actually is triune. And yet, Molnar contended, there has, all too often, been a serious and pervasive problem just the same. Economic trinitarianism, at least as it has been in fashion in the last couple of generations or so, has eclipsed – or refused – something crucial.

It is indeed the case, gloriously, that God is found to be God 'for us', the One who goes to unfathomable lengths to bless us, and who in so doing reveals that he is triune. But the revelatory drama of God's actions in time only is what it is for creatures *as* the action of the God who is triune eternally. While the economy has epistemic priority for us as we encounter God's self-disclosure, *ontological* or material primacy lies in the truth that triunity is the manner in which God's immanent life essentially subsists. God does not *become* triune, or somehow *realize* his being *as* triune, in or for his dealings with us: he *already is* triune, irreducibly and to the depths of his being; just as such, his resolve to have a history with creatures is so momentous, in its design and in its effects. There would be no God 'for us' if there were not already 'God in himself'.

In far too much modern trinitarianism, Molnar suggested, the spectre of Hegel has lurked unchecked: it has seemed as if God somehow 'needs' the world in order to be the triune God he declares himself to be. In the deployment of Rahner's famous *Grundaxiom* – 'the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity' – much hinges on the force of the copula; the matter is not helped by Rahner's own supplement to his statement: 'and vice versa'. Taken at its most radical, that logic seems to suggest that God is not triune apart from history, or that immanent relations are one and the same as economic relations, such that the former may be collapsed into the latter without remainder. Categorically: not so. The economic movement is suspended from, reiterative of, God's immanent being, and genuinely makes his immanent being known: it shows us no other God than the God there eternally is. But God's immanent being is not dissolved into his economic being, nor is his immanent being in some way or other constituted in or for the purposes of its economic turn. The economic occurrence is charged with the boundless energy of a life that is relationally complete in itself regardless of any world. It is utterly gracious.

For Molnar, no one in modern theology saw the importance of this truth more clearly than Barth – and Barth himself held onto its implications a great deal more consistently than some of his readers have thought. Much of Molnar's argument in 2002 was developed in firmly polemical form, setting its face against an assortment of serious errors committed by theologians who failed to discern as Barth did why the immanent Trinity matters so much. Barth's Christology affords a major resource. Ebionite and Docetic Christologies are alike to be repudiated, as Barth saw. Theology must begin with Jesus Christ as presented to us in Scripture; failure to recognize his deity, his antecedent divine reality as the only-begotten Son of the Father, is failure to recognize God as he really is for us; the humanity of Jesus in itself does not reveal God, who is veiled in the manner of his revelation, and is made known only in the miracle of the resurrection; the recognition of the deity of Jesus is an analytic, not a synthetic matter, and his uniqueness as God enfleshed is in no way dependent upon the believing community's evaluation of him. In various ways, these Christological points, vital for theology's confession, had all been dismally compromised in modern economic trinitarianism. For all the talk of Christ and revelation, in reality the understanding of what it means to say that God is 'for us' had been established somewhere *other* than in the actual divine-human Jesus Christ of the gospel, whose unique person and work declare how sheerly gracious and miraculous a gift the knowledge of God is for creatures. To acknowledge that this Jesus Christ is the only possible starting point for properly Christian speech about God is to

see that a clear distinction is needed between the immanent and the economic Trinity.

Barth got it; an alarming number of others have not. Molnar's targets were wide-ranging: theologies of experience as variously articulated by Gordon Kaufman, Catherine LaCugna, Sallie McFague and Elizabeth Johnson; the faulty Christologies (if so they can be called) of Paul Knitter and John Hick; the transcendental method of Rahner; Moltmann's ecological doctrine of creation; Pannenberg's reckoning of the relationship between freedom and history; and a fair few other things besides. Theologians who had (wittingly or otherwise) misapplied or compromised Barth were also in the cross-hairs: those whose accounts of revelation had effectively collapsed essence into economy, or rejected any place whatever in Christology for a *Logos asarkos*; those whose presentations of the mediation of the enfleshed Word implied that his humanity as such was revelatory; those whose treatments of 'relationality' risked the elevation of an amorphous external concept over the particularity of divine action.

One close corollary of Molnar's argument about what it means – and does *not* mean – to speak of God's triune presence in history is the nature of *faith* in the knowledge of God. In particular, it is important to consider the role of the *Holy Spirit* as divine enabler of faith's knowledge, the sovereign agent of our apprehension that God has elected to reveal himself supremely in the person of Jesus Christ, his incarnate Word. More obtuse critics of Molnar's case in 2002 supposed that he undervalued history, or afforded little importance to the reality that the immanent Trinity may be spoken of at all only on the basis of God's self-communication in the temporal missions of his Word and Spirit. On the contrary, Molnar's position was framed a good deal more precisely: revelation only takes the particular shape it does in history – it only *is* 'revelation' as distinct from projection on our part – *as* the act of the God who is not in any way constituted at the level of his being in the process. Nevertheless, Molnar was aware that his argument for the doctrine of the immanent Trinity might be read, as more appreciative assessment discerned, as a sort of 'ground-clearing' exercise: as an attempt to sweep away what was *wrong* with contemporary economic Trinitarianism as much as a sustained attempt to elaborate a more coherent account of the nature of the knowledge that is shared with creatures in time. More needed to be said about the place of human experience in particular, and about what it means to affirm that the triune God is indeed known and confessed in faith.

In his 2015 study, *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, Molnar has turned his attention to this matter in more detail, to ask how a doctrine of the economic

Trinity ought to be expressed so as to speak appropriately of these themes. The key issue is not whether experience has a place, but what kind of place it has, and how it is defined. Too often, modern theology has begun by focusing on our experience of faith when it ought to have begun with the God experienced in faith. The result has been a pervasive confusion of nature and grace, reason and revelation. Molnar's corrective finds its major inspiration, once again, in Barth, but T. F. Torrance also plays a significant part, yet more extensive than in the first edition of *Divine Freedom*. Over the years since that book's appearance, Molnar had worked a great deal more on Torrance, in 2009 publishing a major study, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Ashgate). In *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, Barth and Torrance are both seen as offering crucial insights into a number of closely related themes. These include: the dangers of attempting to speak of God other than on the basis of God's free and gracious actions in history, made known in the Spirit's power; the work of the Spirit as necessary agent of that knowledge (only through God can God be known), and as the One who renders it actual in the personal, concrete particulars of creaturely lives; the distinction between classical Christology's confession of the eternal Word made flesh and modern attempts to 'historicize' the being of God as such in light of the incarnation; the relationship between the obedience of the eternal Son in history and the Son's essential relation to the Father (here Torrance emerges as preferable to Barth); the role of the Spirit as the One who unites us to Christ through faith and empowers the existence and direction of Christian life before God in the world.

At all points, Molnar continues to insist that firm distinctions need to be drawn along the lines he had set out earlier: between revelation and faith on the one hand, natural reason and creaturely history *simpliciter,* as locus of reliable knowledge, on the other. At the same time, he argues passionately that God is revealed in history as God truly is, and that Spirit-enabled faith on the part of creaturely knowers is not some insecure or uncertain thing, but the basis for genuine, wondering assurance of God's love – and thus for our true freedom as creatures. But only by proper identification of the person and work of the Holy Spirit can theology spell out how all this works. The Holy Spirit must be clearly differentiated from the human spirit if the human spirit itself is to be viewed aright: liberated by God's Spirit from the perceived obligation to secure itself (sin's self-deception), the human spirit in fact enters into a freedom freely given in the knowledge of God, and begins in turn to enact the entailments of that relation in creaturely forms. Divine freedom establishes the nature and dignity of creaturely freedom. Just as God is not locked up in his own aseity, but moves

on the basis of his own completeness to bless us as he alone is able to do, so too the blessing he affords us constitutes our true fulfilment: a summons into the pattern of creatureliness – Spirit-enabled as it must be – for which we were made. When the Spirit's person and work are presented as they should be, human experience of life before God has content indeed. Properly glossed in the language of God's free grace in action, the distinction of the immanent and the economic does not inhibit moral theology for creatures: it funds it in the right currency.

A great deal of the energy of *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit* continues to lie in Molnar's critique of false conceptions of divine freedom, and in the demolition of a range of their exemplars, Protestant and Catholic, in contemporary theology. In much of this he is responding to critics of his earlier work. One example is found in the writing of Ben Myers, whose arguments about the eternal deity of God as unthinkable in any detachment from the human history of Jesus Molnar sees as a serious misreading of Barth, and a major misconstrual of Molnar's earlier reasoning on the point of continuing to affirm a *Logos asarkos* while also affirming (with Barth) that the revealed form of God is that which is found in the enfleshed person of the mediator. As Barth did not stop realizing, God assuredly has his eternal being, in its essential relational form, irrespective of the human history of Jesus. God's election of humanity is his gloriously positive exercise of his own freedom, his determination not to be God without us, but that determination is no ontological necessity for God, nor is it constitutive of God's triune deity. Contrary to a perverse claim: Jesus does not make God to be God.

Molnar continues to disagree sharply with Bruce McCormack in particular, whose programmatic moves to rethink the relationship of election and Trinity after Barth had begun to receive his critical attention in the first edition of *Divine Freedom.* McCormack's arguments have been developed much more fully over the years since then, and Molnar has played a prominent role in attacking them. A core aspect of McCormack's case – that God eternally 'assigns himself his being' in the eternal act in which he determines to be God-with-us, and thus, logically albeit not chronologically, election has primacy over Trinity – is here subjected to very fierce critique. It categorically will not do, Molnar insists, to claim that God's determination to be for us in Jesus Christ is in any sense the *ground* of his eternal being, the act of God in which constitutes himself as triune. That kind of 'historicizing' of the divine essence on Christological grounds is theologically disastrous – not because it is wrong to treat the history of the mediator as vital, but because as it presents itself the approach treats the

mediator's history as directly constitutive of God's deity. Molnar engages other readings of Barth's 'actualism' which he considers a little more nuanced (Kevin Hector, Paul Dafydd Jones, Paul Nimmo), but argues that these too continue to press Barth's later exposition of the fleshly history of the mediator in reductionist directions. With George Hunsinger and others, Molnar is convinced that the later Barth did not ever intend us to infer that God's Godness as such is constituted in or by dint of his election of humanity, or that God determines himself to be triune with a view to his fellowship with us. Barth's language could be adventurous, possibly misleading or inconsistent, but it surely did not invite us to go where such revisionist Christologies have chosen to go under its putative inspiration. Whatever qualifications are entered about the nature of God's eternal decision, the claim that God's being *in se* is so determined (even logically or prospectively) by or for God's actions *ad extra* remains a fatal dissolution of divine aseity; it posits a God who in fact cannot act decisively for us in history in the way revelation declares he does, since the nature of his own eternal deity is in one way or another, at its very depths, dependent upon that same history.

For a yet more extreme example of the mistake, Molnar looks at Robert Jenson's account of the identity of the Son as eschatologically (rather than protologically) established in consequence of Jesus' human interaction with his Father, and so as flowing directly from his resurrection. If McCormack does his 'Hegeling' via election, Jenson did his via eschatology. Both approaches, Molnar argues, trade on quite the wrong understanding of what it should mean that God makes known his being in his outward works; they produce Christologies quite other than the confession of classical faith, according to which the divine Son through whom God created all things is eternally and essentially divine already, the only-begotten of the Father, his identity as such in no wise dependent upon his temporal story. The person of the Son himself, and in turn the nature of God as triune, is not established by the historical existence of the man Jesus, nor does the resurrection determine the incarnate One's filial identity; it declares in power who he already is: the eternal Son who took flesh.

For Molnar, this is, once again, a position which the later Barth never abandoned, and which Torrance also for his part saw with intense clarity. Indeed, Torrance may have recognized its force with even greater precision and consistency than Barth, for unlike the later Barth Torrance refused to read the economic obedience of the Son back into the immanent Trinity. For Torrance, the vicarious human actions of the obedient Son are indeed actions of the divine Son enfleshed, and as such a mediatorial work wrought in accordance with both of his natures, but they do not, *pace* Barth in *CD* IV/1, bespeak an essential super- and

sub-ordination within the inner life of God. Barth himself was not always careful enough to differentiate the immanent and the economic consistently. In the end, Torrance's Christology offers a more nuanced account of the vital matter of God's essential loving freedom, and of the condescension of the Son as a movement of sheer grace. Torrance's depictions of church, ministry, sacraments and ethics are all the richer for his precision.

The argument elaborated in the first edition of *Divine Freedom* remains clearly determinative in all of this, and Molnar firmly engages those who have failed to appreciate the issues. *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit* can certainly be read as a response to those who have continued to resist Molnar's path – an attempt to spell out yet more fully, in vigorous contradistinction to other positions, exactly what its author does and does not intend us to hear in his invocation of Barth's wisdom on essence and economy, and in particular to engage the debate about Trinity and election, which has become a great deal larger since 2002. The new edition of *Divine Freedom*, issued this year, is not merely a reprint. It offers quite an extensive revision of the original, addressing criticisms of the initial version and tackling in detail some of the tide of literature on Trinity, election and Christology that has flowed since then. There is a fresh preface, a new chapter (ch. 4) on divine freedom, extensive updating of material on Jenson, Moltmann, Pannenberg, Jüngel, and interaction with recent work on Barth's critique of Schleiermacher. 357 pages have become 591. The upshot is a still more thorough treatment of an array of substantial themes in modern theology. The debate about Trinity and election is fundamental, and Molnar builds upon his robust contributions to that.

As *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit* also serves to illustrate in its own ways, that debate has taken a variety of turns, reflecting diverse enthusiasm for Barth interpretation *simpliciter* (in what ways, if any, did Barth change his views between *CD* I and *CD* IV?), and for constructive theology as a separate matter (does the mature Barth point us towards the overthrow of classical metaphysics, the 'correction' of a logic on God and election from which, admittedly, Barth may himself have struggled to break free?). Either way, the attempt to argue that the doctrine of election, appraised as it must be Christologically, requires us to rethink God's triune essence and the nature of God's freedom to be the God he declares himself to be, has proved extremely controversial. The new edition of *Divine Freedom* remains as determined as ever to insist that the issue far transcends our reading of Barth, and that, so far from being constructive, the notion that election requires us to reconceive eternal triune freedom is in fact theologically catastrophic.

As has often been remarked, the sharpness of the controversy within Barth scholarship has been heightened because it is on the face of it a debate among fellow-enthusiasts: the powerful appeal of Barth's high doctrine of revelation and its essential connection with the doctrine of the triune God is not in dispute. As such, the debate is not, at least in principle, an argument between those who confess that the doctrine of the essential Trinity is vital and those who find reasons to propose that it is not, nor for that matter is it a confrontation between those who derive their accounts of history or creaturely freedom squarely from the creature's relation to the creator and those who want to start in some other place. It is, rather, an argument in which it is the *nature* of God's freedom to be God without us, and the *nature* of his freedom in love and mercy to choose to be God with and for us, that is at stake. What is it, exactly, that revelation tells us about divine freedom? Does God's revealed freedom mean that he is eternally, triunely free in himself, and that it is *in* this essential, irreducibly triune freedom that he acts in time, reiterating his eternally triune being wondrously with and for his creatures; or does it mean that God's eternal freedom can be meaningfully spoken of – theologized – only *as* the freedom we encounter in the incarnation, such that we are obliged radically to reconsider what it means for God 'freely' to determine himself so as to have triune fellowship with us?

As Molnar acknowledges (*Divine Freedom,* 2017, xii), the dispute is increasingly not so much about whether the doctrine of the immanent Trinity is important, but about its character and shape, and about the function it plays in our theology. This at least has become clearer since 2002. For Molnar, the fundamental concerns have not remotely been allayed; the drastic implications of false approaches have only become more obvious. As he sees it, a revisionist construal of Barth – the attempt to invoke the mature Barth's representation of the incarnation and history to undergird an argument that election logically precedes Trinity – is not only a misreading of Barth: it is, much more seriously, an undermining of one of the most vital functions of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity, which is precisely to *rule out* speculation about God's inner nature in detachment from God's self-disclosure. Here, of course, lies the crux: revisionist Barthians insist that it is precisely the force of revelation that *requires* their rereading of Trinity and election. For Molnar, what they are in fact doing is reverting to a form of speculation that Barth himself could never have proposed to license, and effecting a basic collapse of the essential Trinity into the economic. A logical determination on God's part eternally to *be* a certain way – to *be* triune – is projected in a manner that renders the essence of eternal being itself dependent

on what is purposed for its temporal enactment. In that, revelation is simply *not* our guide, and the kind of freedom attributed to the revealing God comes from some other place. Overturning of classical metaphysics it may be; *pace* its advocates' most basic claims, it is not what the incarnation declares.

Molnar's ways of framing things in the new edition of *Divine Freedom* interact with diverse refinements and defences of the revisionist position, but only find the compromises of the tradition more alarming than ever. The endeavours to warn against their implications are entirely serious (though, as anyone who knows the author will not be surprised to find, they are also advanced with verve and humour). The new edition remains full of energy, deeply suffused by the concern to repudiate a 'dependent deity' (*Divine Freedom*, xvi); to set out by contrast a right rendition of Trinity, election, freedom and history; to address inept allegations that a doctrine of the immanent Trinity displaces historical occurrence, or creaturely dignity, or revelation in time, or the wonder of knowing God incarnate by the Spirit. Barth remained right on most if not all of the essential themes; we ignore or misuse his instruction at our peril. A faithful Christology, a right appreciation of divine action in history, of the creature's space, and of the miracle of grace – all are intimately bound up with the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, and the manner of their interconnections requires precision at each point. For Molnar, even a theologian such as Colin Gunton – who, next to Torrance, recognized as clearly as anyone else after Barth the importance of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity – could fail to see that the later Barth's way of doing his Christology remained more careful than it seemed: so far from failing to give place to the humanity of the Saviour, Barth was simply resolved to give that humanity its proper grounding in the person of the divine Word, and in setting forth this reality to avoid any separation of the mediation wrought by the Word from the mediating work of the Spirit.

For me, the burden of Molnar's case in these books is simply compelling. Some will find them a demanding read: the arguments are pursued in thorough and expansive style, their polemical dimensions seldom far from the surface. The advocacy is passionate, and there are very firm judgements about approaches that get things wrong. But there is, in the directness, undeniable clarity: the writing is invariably lucid and orderly, with judicious signposts and summaries to introduce and connect up arguments (parts of *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit* in particular began life as major essays rather than as chapters of a monograph). The referencing is extensive, and there are some substantial footnotes. Both volumes evince very impressive breadth and depth of learning in modern theology, and a strong sense also of the classical tradition.

Some of Molnar's targets, as he well knows, deserve his fire more than others; it may in some ways be unfortunate that the controversies of Barth scholarship, serious as they are, have become so closely entangled with other, more egregious errors of modern method from which most or all of the participants in the Barth debate might also wish to distance themselves. It may be also that in his detailed interactions with his critics in *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit* Molnar finds himself focusing on the further elaboration of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, particularly its connection with a faithful Christology, almost as much as on an account of divine action within creation. Yet inasmuch as Molnar continues to identify a *tendency* within modern theology, a 'trend' (*Divine Freedom*, 529) toward rendering God dependent on history, he is, I believe, right; and he is right to warn that along that road lie all manner of dark consequences. Behind the trend, as he shows, lies a variety of forces, and the problems themselves take many forms, some subtler or more sophisticated than others. But Molnar warns us there is a general issue to confront. Radically experiential or symbolic theologies may in fact exist on a continuum with ill-framed accounts of revelation. Even theologies in Barth's shadow, he says, get things badly wrong where they qualify Barth's perduring insistence on the completeness of God in himself, or where they see Barth as starting to trade this away (or inviting us to do so) in pursuit of some deeper insight about the being of the One who acts in history.

There are of course dangers in lumping so many positions together as erroneous, not least the risk of flattening out their various intellectual contexts, inheritances and aims. Rahner and Jenson, say, have very different lineages; it is admitted, again, that Pannenberg does not get things quite as badly wrong as Moltmann (never mind LaCugna); and it is fair to surmise that many of Molnar's Roman Catholic interlocutors never were inclined to read Barth one quarter as carefully as he has (though that in part is Molnar's concern: like Torrance, he wants Barth's powerful significance as theologian for the *whole* church to be appreciated). Such a boldly diagnostic argument as Molnar's can no doubt be quibbled with in some of its details, and at times one might wish to tease out the intellectual bases of the individual patients' symptoms – the differing grounds of their respective pathologies – a little more. But the comparative work is certainly here, and Molnar has sought carefully to engage the secondary literature in the nuancing of his prescriptions. It is not wrong to caution that similar kinds of mistakes get made from very different starting points.

For some, Molnar's reading of Barth will undoubtedly remain static or restricted, inattentive to the development in Barth's thought, unprepared to recognize where Barth's bolder thinking may ultimately inspire us to go. As

such, it will also remain far too much in the shadow of Torrance's ways of reading Barth, not least the framing of revelation and experience, theology's 'centre in God' versus some 'centre in ourselves', as a persistent binary. Yet, as Molnar shows, that binary need not be crude, nor need it in any sense be taken to entail a dismissal of either creaturely faith or creaturely works; all that is entailed is the due ordering of the creator–creature relation, and a serious account of the activity of the divine Spirit within the creature's realm. But even if we think the heuristic categories a little rigid, the reading of Barth at times a little begrudging of *any* significant evolution, the repudiation of 'post-metaphysical' ventures decidedly fierce – the constructive point is surely right. If we do not grant due place to the antecedent freedom of God's triune relations, we shortchange all manner of things, not only in the doctrine of God, but also for creatures.

It is hardly the case, as Molnar shows, that the economic Trinity does not matter, or that theology does not also have major work to do in expounding the history of the covenant, or the nature, calling and ends of created beings as appointed, reconciled and redeemed. It is simply that in our generation especially, trinitarian theologians have particular reason to call attention to the importance of the doctrine of God *in se* if they are to be faithful to the proportions of the gospel's story. Whatever the idiom, far too much economic trinitarianism has been woefully inadequate in its handling of these proportions, treating creaturely time as the only sphere of which theological intelligence may usefully speak when it talks of God's way of being God. Molnar may seem to exaggerate when he suggests that thoroughgoing pantheism – the wholesale failure to differentiate God from our experiences of the world we inhabit – is the inevitable danger, but radical projectionism is certainly a present concern; and with it, as ever, reversion to idolatry. That way, as Barth well knew, lies theology's implosion – ultimately into nihilism.

There are, perhaps, three things that Molnar might ponder a little more; I offer these only by way of suggestions, not as criticism of the main arguments. One is the degree to which the themes which dominate the case are so heavily redolent of modernity. The renaissance of trinitarianism in the twentieth century hardly amounted to the recovery of an entirely forgotten doctrine, as has far too often been claimed, but its interests were profoundly affected by their cultural setting and the theological challenges that situation had been taken to pose. It is basic to the reasoning of many of the positions which Molnar attacks that these are attempts to do trinitarian thinking precisely under the conditions of modernity, and we can scarcely do justice to Barth himself without reckoning with his acute sense of his intellectual context. To frame one's approach to the doctrine of the

immanent Trinity and its functions predominantly in the categories of *freedom*, divine and creaturely, is certainly a distinctly modern way of treating things; so too is a particular emphasis on the *epistemological* significance of maintaining the correct sequence of divine prevenience and creaturely limitation.

Now, it is immediately obvious that Molnar gives profoundly counter-cultural appraisals of these themes. Our knowledge of God, he insists, is *not* dependent upon our own resources, enquiries or ideas, but secured entirely in God's gracious, sovereign and effective willingness to be known by us. Divine freedom, again, is not some apotheosis of a modernist dream of autonomy or power, God's (merely) absolute freedom *from* dependence, but God's capacity for his positive determination of himself as the One who relates to us: his loving freedom *for* creatures and their history, ultimately in the humility of incarnation, cross and grave. Still, if this point is pursued at all, the kind of freedom that belongs to God is very specific. Since it is not merely independence or isolation, as Molnar rightly says, but rather the loving freedom of the God who is already eternally relational in himself in his triune life, the primary characterization of God's immanent way of being God is not reducible to 'freedom' *simpliciter*: it is, more expansively, God's relational perfection, the incomprehensibly rich plenitude of his life in himself. The way in which God's perfection eternally is certainly includes his freedom from external determination or internal need, but it is, we might say, a great deal larger than that: it is the freedom of the Father for the Son, the Son for the Father, in or through or by the Spirit who binds – frees – them. For God to be free is for God to be free within himself in and for the essential relations in which the sheer abundance of his perfect life consists.

Pre-modern trinitarian theology often had an acute sense of this: essential trinitarian relations constitute God's eternal fulfilment and blessedness, and it is as the One who is relationally complete that God acts *ad extra*, in sheer generosity. On that reckoning, freedom as such may have a restricted reach, for it is rather in the unique immensity and richness of the eternal God's relational vitality, in all its boundless abundance, that he creates and saves. The triune God is free in the sense that he is utterly sufficient in his own perfect life, and categories such as aseity and simplicity are only given the specificity they deserve if glossed that way. This is what God's economic self-manifestation shows: not merely that God is not dependent upon creation or our history in any way, and so must never be confused with them, but also that God is *able* to reach out beyond his own being and give life and being to creation and creatures *because* he is in himself eternally relationally replete. So: I wonder if a little less emphasis on freedom as such, and more on divine perfection, vitality or

abundance as overarching theme of God's essential triunity, would enrich the treatment. It might make even clearer the distance of the approach from various modern assumptions, and also help to point the way towards a larger account of creaturely history in general as viewed in light of God's goodness – a potentially more connected theology of election, creation, providence, reconciliation and perfection. That would hardly be foreign to Barth's own aspirations. To put things very crudely: the immanent Trinity, seen not only as God's eternal transcendence or independence of creation but also as his relational fullness *in* and *for* himself, *and so* in turn for us in his outward acts, takes us everywhere that systematic theology needs to go.

This leads to a second observation. We might well say that modern economic trinitarianism goes wrong again and again, not by disagreeing with (or despoiling) Barth, or even by forgetting (or repudiating) Athanasius, but by failing to read Scripture attentively, or by treating scriptural authority as malleable to its own creative purposes. The errors are expressive of just the false sorts of experientialism (moral, philosophical or historicist) that Molnar rightly debunks; but their correction may involve a larger place for the demonstration that an account of the perfection of God-in-himself is a necessary conceptual gloss on Scripture's testimony. To some of those for whom Molnar's case is a challenge, that point is strangely elusive: the Bible, they say, does not make nearly so much of God *in se* as writers such as Molnar (or Barth) suggest. If that judgement is wrong, and surely it is, the case deserves to be made, at least in outline. Some such demonstration was, of course, a repeated patristic reading strategy, at least in its maturest forms – the aim to trace inner-divine relations in the Bible's claims about the God who creates and reconciles involved the case that God is logically intelligible as the God who is triune in himself prior to his dealings with us. This God is no other than the triune One who makes himself known; but he is the triune God already. In their own ways, both Barth and Torrance went to some lengths to develop the same points. Yet scholars such as the late lamented Robert Jenson make much of the claim that Scripture simply does *not* give us what some of those arguments proposed – a God whose essence is of interest or meaning independently of the drama of its temporal occurrence. If such scholars are mistaken, it is worth showing a little more from Scripture why that is so. One problem with the debate on Trinity and election not least (as with too many other themes in contemporary analytic appraisal) is that surprisingly scant effort is often made to refer the arguments to the biblical picture. An account of the purpose of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity can undoubtedly be presented against a backcloth of modern theology's ways of operating; it

would be advanced even more powerfully on a larger canvas, or with at least an introductory sketch of the doctrine's scriptural roots.

In somewhat similar vein, it would be interesting also to look at some of the ways in which classical theology has resourced its accounts of divine perfection or plenitude by comparison with modern ones – even where the motivations have been quite similar. The differences between Barth and Thomas, say, on the relationship between God's essential actuality and God's external movement towards creation need not be pictured only in terms of differences to do with the analogy of being, or nature and grace, or revelation and dialectics: they also have to do with different ways of expressing a shared investment in the primacy of God's being in himself. In highly simplistic terms: for Thomas, God's external acts or missions correspond to the internal processions of God's being; for Barth, external acts correspond to internal acts. Even with the revisionists' Barth firmly set aside, this may suggest somewhat different kinds of account of the structure of God's self-correspondence in his outward turn. And vastly more could of course be said, in patristic as well as medieval terms. The observation is merely obvious: if modern reductionism is to be shunned, the tradition itself has a range of ways to help us in the articulation of Scripture's witness.

Third, if the immanent Trinity is, as Scripture attests, the bedrock of creaturely dignity, of the right kind of account of history and indeed of our experience of it, then the argument for its primacy takes us naturally into a range of positive claims about creation and ethics, and about the nature of salvation. The crass reduction of trinitarian theology to ethics or politics is, of course, one of the many late-modern errors from which Molnar's arguments rightly seek to deliver us. Yet among the lessons he sets before us is the point that the doctrine of the immanent Trinity is, in reality, the basis of Christian soteriology, and highly practical in its implications, in so far as it involves a summation of all that the gospel is about in moral, spiritual and existential terms. In their insistence on the wondrous adequacy and generosity of God *in se,* Molnar's books adduce a powerful case against anthropocentrism, with all its moralizing of the evangel, and against the despair to which false strategies of creaturely busyness inevitably tend.

As *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit* begins to chart in its final chapter, living 'in and from' the Holy Spirit who eternally unites the Father and the Son means embracing an anthropology very different from those technologies of the self in which the modern world has professed such specialism. It would be good to hear even more about how this pattern takes shape as the enactment of creaturely fellowship with God in the world. If the eternally triune One takes us

into intimacy with himself now as well as eschatologically, we are recipients, even now, of the privileges of the Son's relation to his Father in the Spirit, and it is that which determines our identity and our tasks (vast yet also delimited) right now. Brought near to know and enjoy in Jesus Christ by the Spirit the presence of the God who has made us for this end, we are invited into a fellowship which means our proper fulfilment as creaturely agents. Fellowship means neither extrinsicism nor absorption, but covenant correspondence, and the wonder of filial status. In this privilege lies the dignity and responsibility of a life of attestation – not the implicit substitution of our work for God's, nor the intolerable burden of mediating divine presence to the world by dint of our ecclesial endeavours (our efforts, say, to *imitate* divine relations socially), but genuine moral space, and the pursuit, by the Spirit's power, of our highest end.

The message about God's freedom, if so we are to pitch things, is actually much better news for ours than many modern trinitarian theologies seem to suggest. Ironically, economic trinitarianism gives us a weaker picture than its classical alternative, inasmuch as it typically misrepresents the creature's moral ontology before its creator. The soteriological and ethical moves made in Molnar's depiction of the life of grace are fine indeed; it is just tempting to seek their expansion, not least on their significance as alternative to some fashionable reductions of the dogmatics of reconciliation and perfection to categories of personal or ecclesial activism.

But I must not criticize a dear friend for failing to write a different kind of treatment, or suggest that he ought to have written longer books. The argument in these ones is powerful as it is, and I sense that its author is well aware of where it could have been taken much further (or made more polemical still!). Molnar has not aspired to adduce a comprehensive biblical and historical account of trinitarian theology as a whole, far less an entire systematics, but to offer a focused case for a theme which contemporary theology in particular badly needs to hear. Ordered by the evangel, lucid, perceptive and practically rich in their implications, these weighty volumes have a great deal to teach us all. If you haven't looked at the first edition of *Divine Freedom* for far too long, or want to know how Molnar has refined and extended his case in response to its critics, go and read these volumes. If you've read them both already, read them again.

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