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978-0-521-70113-6 - The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity

Edited by Peter C. Phan

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
THE TRINITY

How do Christians reconcile their belief in one God with the concept of three divine “persons”? This *Companion* provides an overview of how the Christian doctrine of the Trinity has been understood and articulated in the last two thousand years. The trinitarian theologies of key theologians, from the New Testament to the twenty-first century, are carefully examined, and the doctrine of the Trinity is brought into dialogue with non-Christian religions as well as with other Christian beliefs. Authors from a range of denominational backgrounds explore the importance of trinitarian thought, locating the Trinity within the wider context of systematic theology. Contemporary theology has seen a widespread revival of the doctrine of the Trinity, and this book incorporates the most recent developments in the scholarship.

Peter C. Phan holds the Ignacio Ellacuría Chair of Catholic Social Thought in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University. He is the author of numerous books including *Christianity with an Asian Face* (2003), *In Our Own Tongues: Asian Perspectives on Mission and Inculturation* (2004), and *Being Religious Interreligiously* (2004).

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Preface

The subject matter of this book is the Trinity, now widely acknowledged to be a mystery of salvation and the central Christian belief. That the Triune God is so now may be a commonplace, but that has not always been the case. One of the pleasant surprises in contemporary theology is the widespread revival of the doctrine of the Trinity. Long shunted to the wings, the Trinity is now occupying center stage. Karl Rahner's oft-quoted *bon mot* that Christians are, theologically speaking, "mere monotheists" (that is, unitarians) may have been true in the 1960s and earlier. Fortunately, it is no longer so. Recently, a spate of books and articles on the Trinity by Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant theologians has restored this neglected Christian doctrine to its rightful place. These works have not only retrieved the classical teachings on the Trinity through serious historical research, but have also given the lie to the claim that the trinitarian dogma is nothing more than abstruse metaphysics and a conundrum of "higher mathematics" of one-equals-three and vice versa. They have shown how trinitarian theology is necessary for a full understanding of such burning issues as the nature of the human person, suffering, sexism, ecology, social and economic justice, interreligious dialogue, and so on.

The twists and turns through which the Triune God migrated from the center to the periphery of Christian consciousness and back to the center again are recounted in the following pages. These winding paths make a fascinating story in themselves, along which readers now are invited to travel. The only thing to be stressed here is that this volume is intended to be a "companion" to those who wish to understand what Christians mean by the Trinity. It is not a manual, a textbook, a digest, or (the Triune) God forbid, a CliffsNotes of trinitarian theology. Each contributor would like to be a fellow traveler with the reader, or better still, to invoke the etymology of "companion" (*com* + *panis*), someone who shares bread, the bread of knowledge and friendship, with the readers, be they students or scholars.

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The volume itself has its own twists and turns of sorts. It began when Dr. Kate Brett, the senior editor at Cambridge University Press, approached me with the proposal to edit the *Companion*. Her thoughtfulness and gentleness persuaded me that it would be a worthwhile task. The book proposal went through the usual blind review process, and I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Brett and I agreed that the contributors should not only represent a wide spectrum of theological views but also be balanced in terms of gender, ethnicity, and geography, to honor the global character of contemporary theology. Unfortunately, not every attempt to achieve these goals was successful, but the failure was not due to lack of will or occasional strong arm-twisting.

A number of administrative changes occurred at Cambridge University Press while the book was being worked on, and the hands overseeing the production of the volume changed several times. I am of course deeply grateful to Kate Brett for her gentle care and guidance. Gillian Dadd and, then, Aline Guillermet took over the editorial process with competence and diligence, and I am thankful to them for bringing the book to port.

Another person I would like to thank is Dr. Fiona Little. She is the copy editor any writer and publishing house can ever hope to have: detailed, sharp-eyed, timely, persistent, patient, kind. Shaping all these diverse essays into a consistent style and format was a colossal labor, and Fiona has achieved it with unparalleled professionalism and skills. However, any errors that may remain are my responsibility. I also thank Dr. Anh Tran for his help with indexing.

Of course, my deepest thanks go to the contributors themselves; without them the book would not have existed at all. In my correspondence with them I have always referred to it as “*our* Trinity book,” and I meant it literally. Despite their busy writing schedules, they all have responded with generosity and alacrity to my request to write for the volume. No editor could have been more fortunate. May our friendship, and now our communion with our readers, be a sign, however feeble, of the *koinōnia* that unites the Three That Are One.

Peter C. Phan