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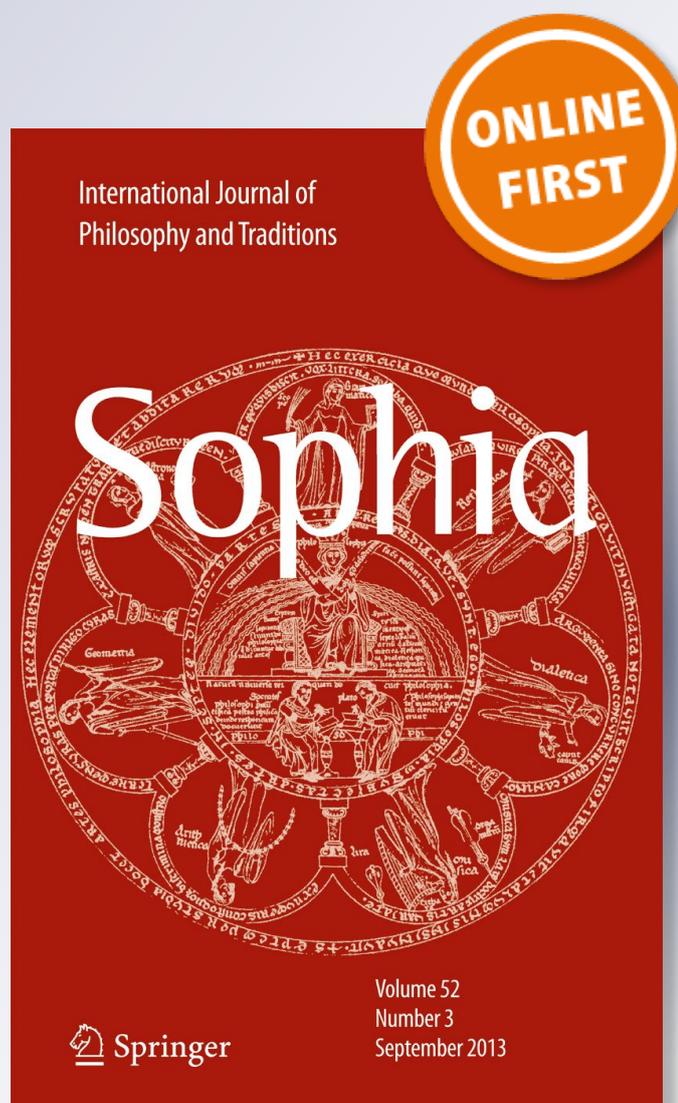
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**Review of Keith Ward, *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine* Cambridge University Press, 2015, ISBN:978-1107531819, pb, xvii+271pp**

**Philip Woodward<sup>1</sup>** 

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Christians affirm that God is ‘three persons in one substance.’ Accounts of how this could be so sort into two types: (a) ‘social Trinitarian’ views, which start from the ‘three persons’ part of the Trinitarian formula, and then try to explain the substantial unity of the Trinity, and (b) ‘substance Trinitarian’ views, which start from the ‘one substance’ part of the Trinitarian formula, and then try to explain the personal threefoldness of the Trinity.

In *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*, Keith Ward pushes back against a recent resurgence in social Trinitarianism and then proposes a new version of substance Trinitarianism which he claims ‘will have plausibility and practical significance in the scientific age’ (xiv). Ward particularly stresses two objections to social Trinitarianism. First, he critiques the now standard motivation for social Trinitarianism, viz.: because God’s nature is self-giving love (*agape*), God cannot, or will not, remain an isolated consciousness, but will exist as a social community of loving persons. Ward’s criticism is that *agape* cannot exist among persons who are utterly alike and utterly self-sufficient. God’s agapic nature is expressed not in community among divine ‘clones’ but in relationship to the created order.

Second, Ward argues that social Trinitarianism collapses into tritheism. Suppose we ask the social Trinitarian, ‘Why are there exactly *three* persons of the godhead?’ If she provides an explanation, it will likely be in terms of the *generation* of the Son and the Spirit by the Father. But then it sounds as though the Son and the Spirit are not divine at all, but are rather *created*.<sup>1</sup> If, on the other hand, the social Trinitarian insists that there is

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Athanasian Creed, the Son and Spirit are not created by the Father, but rather the Son is generated by the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father. One way to understand Ward’s criticism is to say that if the Son and the Spirit are really distinct centers of consciousness from the Father—distinct *individuals*—then ‘generation’ and ‘procession’ are really just ways of being *created* by the Father.

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no explanation, she is saying that reality at its most primal consists of three uncreated and divine persons—which is indistinguishable from tritheism, Ward claims.

Ward proposes a substance-Trinitarian alternative that he claims is consistent both with the New Testament source material and with later creedal formulations. According to Ward, what it means to say that God is revealed as Trinity is that God (1) creates and cares for creation (as Father); (2) joins and redeems creation (as Son); and (3) sanctifies and reunites with Creation (as Spirit). Notice that each item in this triad makes mention of creation, and so corresponds to the ‘economic’ Trinity, i.e., the threefold nature of the godhead *in relationship with creation*, and as played out in salvation history. Ward wants to distinguish the economic Trinity from an ‘immanent’ Trinity, i.e., threefoldness existing in God *prior to any relationship to creation*. Only in relationship to Creation does God *become* Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Ward argues for this relational understanding of the Trinity by invoking the limitedness of the human vantage point. In general, we should be hesitant to project our experience of God’s dealings with us onto God’s incomprehensible essence. Further, modern cosmology gives us new cause for theological modesty. Given how vast the cosmos has turned out to be, God likely has dealings with extra-terrestrial species. Yet the formula ‘Father, Son, and Spirit’ clearly invokes uniquely human metaphors. Thus, it would be ‘almost absurdly arrogant’ for us to claim that our experience of God as Father, Son, and Spirit is definitive of the divine essence.

These considerations are not as strong as Ward takes them to be. First of all, if Christian revelation presents God as tri-personal, then the epistemically humble thing to do may be to accept that God is essentially tri-personal (rather than that God merely *acts* tri-personally). Second, while it is true that the Christian creeds refer to the persons of the godhead using metaphors only humans (or beings very much like humans) can understand, it does not follow that we are not thereby referring to God as he is essentially. Consider an analogy. My brothers and I can refer to Tina Woodward by thinking of her as *my mother*, but nobody else can. But simply because *you* cannot refer to Tina Woodward as ‘my mother’ does not mean that when *I* say ‘My mother grows plums,’ I am saying something that is true only in relation to me.

A final concern has to do with Ward’s Christology, which likely places his view beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. For Ward, God is ‘Son’ in the sense that, in Jesus, God joins and redeems creation. But who, then, is Jesus? Jesus is not the eternally existent second person of the Trinity; after all, on Ward’s view, there is no divine Son prior to God’s redemptive activity *vis-à-vis* creation. Rather, Jesus is ‘the Word made flesh’ in the sense that that the divine *logos*—which Ward interprets as the human archetype in the divine mind—is perfectly manifest in the thoughts and actions of Jesus. As best as I can tell, this means that Jesus is not God. Ward’s view is probably a variant of *adoptionism*, according to which Jesus is a particularly godly human whom God adopts as his son—a position which has traditionally been considered heretical.

<sup>2</sup> Now, there *is* an immanent Trinity, he claims: it consists of God’s *dispositions* to create, redeem, and sanctify. Though the three revealed persons mentioned in the creeds are ‘rooted’ in these immanent dispositions, they should not be identified with them.

Though I do not think Ward successfully produces a ‘reformulation of Trinitarian doctrine’ that fits within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, his *process* of reformulation is exemplary. Ward writes as a scholar of the Christian tradition of the first order, drawing together theological texts ancient and recent, and cutting across traditional divisions (Catholic vs. Orthodox, analytic vs. continental, etc.), all in a spirit of intellectual rigor and creativity. Scholars working within the Christian intellectual tradition would do well to read *Christ and the Cosmos* carefully and then to emulate its methodology in their own work.