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Book Review: A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church (Franz Dunzl)

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Book Review

Glenn Morrison, *The Heythrop Journal* 52:5 (Sept, 2011): 822-823.

A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church. By Franz Dunzl. Pp. xi, 148, T&T Clark, 2007.

Franz Dünzl has produced a concise and clear presentation of the Early Church's struggle for truth. Today, the doctrine of the Trinity is subject to various hermeneutical explanations to make it accessible. Accordingly the struggle for truth and making sense of biblical revelation continues. Nonetheless, a historical gulf exists between the framing and implementation of Neo-Nicene orthodoxy and contemporary attempts for ecumenical conversation and consensus. Dünzl's short book has succeeded well to bridge this gulf by providing both historical and theological excurses on the early church's quest to find a rational and orthodox way to develop theology of the Trinity.

Given that the doctrine of the Trinity ultimately defies rationality, Dünzl's look into the history portrays not only the difficult struggle for a Christian image of the Trinity, but the very risk of monotheism, namely the encounter with the incomprehensible being of God. The challenge to see God's triune face and live is one that demands faith, hope and the inner sight that love remains despite disturbing problems, complexity and the heeding of political influence and interference to create unity.

Dünzl provides fascinating historical and theological accounts of the major controversies, players, positions, compromises and ecumenical councils surrounding the relationship between the Father and Son, the identity of Christ, and the question of the Holy Spirit. Especially, the author produces numerous creedal examples of the direction that the theology

of the Trinity was taking. The author does particularly well to point out examples where politics and theology come together, resulting in the fragility of doctrine. One such example is the commanding influence of the Roman Emperor, Constantius II, the son of Constantine, who with his court bishops at the imperial court in Constantinople on New Years Eve 359/360, succeeded to gain all the signatures of the bishops present to sign a creed, thus achieving the 'lowest common denominator' for the sake of compromise and church unity. Known as the 'Homoean compromise' for containing the statement that the begotten Son is 'like (or similar) to the Father', the creed aimed to regulate the differences between the Nicenes, Homoeousians and the Neo-Arians. By denying the use of the terms 'ousia' and 'hypostasis', a political solution and Homoean position was sought as a means to settle theological debates.

Dünzl's example here helps to alert the reader to divisive and politically-tuned ontological gulfs that seek to construct a new order of Trinitarian being. As Dünzl's narrative on the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in early church continues, the reader discovers an example of tenacity in the face of adversity in the figure of Athanasius. Here, the author speaks of 'a great moment in church history' when Athanasius, mindful of the Nicene creed's limitation of not speaking explicitly of one hypostasis or even of three divine hypostases, sets out to turn this into an opportunity for genuine ecumenical and theological discussion at Alexandria in 362. Many great moments in Church history can easily be forgotten. But, let us take a step back to ask: could this moment be just as significant as the experience of the French priest, Bernard Petitjean, who discovered the Hidden Christians (*Kakure Kirishitan*) on 17 March 1865? Remarkably, Fr. Petitjean's endearing encounter of hope less than a hundred and fifty years ago in the Far East gives light to the enduring human quest for faith

and truth despite persecution and repression. In comparison, travelling deep into the recesses of onto-theological chasms, Dünzl discovers perhaps another worthy moment in Church history to proclaim. Whilst this moment may not bring tears to a Pope, it none the less creates a foundation for theological debates to continue in an ecumenical spirit and not remain 'hidden' behind the constraints of politics. In sum, Franz Dünzl's 'A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church' is essential reading for any student and teacher of Systematic Theology.