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# The fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius

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the Gospels, and Paul, make about the resurrection, and the even more divergent interpretations of these statements that come out of the various current theological camps.

What's lacking, of course, in such a broad and brief survey, is a sense of the fire and, yes, faith, that inform both the troubling conclusions of Crossan, Funk and others; and the strong, sometimes harsh, reactions of more conservative theologians. And the danger in depending upon even such an even-handed survey as this is that we may have already relegated the third-questers to history along with Reimarus, Renan, Schweizer and the rest. That would be sad, for we surely owe it to Christians struggling to find and hold a faith for the twenty-first century, to let our preaching and teaching show we too have struggled, and still believe.

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## **The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius**

Peter Widdicombe

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994

290 pp.

In a relatively small (ca. 250 pages of text) but costly volume, Peter Widdicombe, of McMaster University, offers a survey of the doctrine concerning divine fatherhood in the Alexandrian tradition. A central category of Christian thought, 'divine fatherhood was a notion received by Origen from his philosophical background as well as from Scripture. He deepened the notion through a systematic analysis of divine titles found in the Old Testament, and he thoroughly rooted it in the teaching of the New. Thus Origen became, in fact, the first proper theoretician of divine Trinity. Widdicombe seems to be at his best, when his careful and clear thinking unfolds the doctrinal implications of the Origenian construct (Part I, in particular chap. 3, pp. 63-92). Thus, for instance, he stresses Origen's emphasis on the *eternity* of fatherhood and sonship in God, a thesis which would again be a matter of dispute during the Arian controversies of the fourth century. The distinction of Father and Son being central in Origen's essay *On Prayer*, chapter 4 offers a genuine theological evaluation, rich in spiritual insights, of that essay.

After a needed transition through the very obscure beginnings of the Arian crisis (Part II), the bulk of the study (Part III, pp. 145-254) is devoted to a thoughtful and attractive description of Athanasius's synthesis. First, the philosophical and scriptural aspects of Athanasian thought are clarified in chapter 8; then divine fatherhood according to Athanasius is

considered in itself (chap. 9), and so is the relationship between Father and Son (chap. 10). A contemplation in broad lines of the Athanasian doctrine of salvation and of its linkage with trinitarian and anti-Arian theology occupies chapter 11.

On a classical issue, which he treats with rather conventional methods, Widdicombe succeeds in providing a delightful reading. His smoothly linear exploration of concepts remains in all cases well organized. Thereby he provides very opportune help to many students, should they be eager or at least in need to understand a Patristic tradition. The direct contact with the analysed sources, and their assumption into a coherent interpretation testifying to their present relevance, are at the core of each chapter. Historical erudition, not being neglected, remains nevertheless marginal. In controverted matters, Widdicombe deliberately keeps a conservative stance, which entails a prudent balance in his style and judgment, at the cost of some misinformation about current scholarship. He reads his ancient authors with the devotion of a nineteenth century Anglican clergyman, even if some of his observations more than once reflect a more contemporary quest of identity in matters of faith. A "Postscript" tries even to face the feminist challenge, but only in recalling academically on the archaic foundations in Western culture and society of masculine metaphors used in traditional God-talk.

A short bibliography and three indexes complete the work. In the field of highly specialized Patristic studies such a monograph feels refreshing and enjoyable. It nurtures the dream of preserving a continuity of thought and language with the Fathers, a dream valuable as much as many others at a time of future-centred ideologies and brand-new technologies pervading all forms of traditional thinking.

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Thomas Aquinas

Translated by Jean T. and John A. Oesterle

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995

\$49.95 US

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Thomas S. Hibbs

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995

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