
Gerald O' Collins, S J 1999 – **The tripersonal God: Understanding and interpreting the Trinity**

London: Geoffrey Chapman

Reviewer: Prof J Buitendag (University of Pretoria)

What a marvellous book! Reading this book is really an enriching experience. Not only is it very well written, but the exposition and line of argument are also crystal clear and convincing. The book prompts the reader to enter into a discussion with it. In my personal copy, I made quite a number of exclamation marks *as well as* question marks – exactly what a relevant and challenging contribution in scientific literature should be all about!

The point of departure of the book is the absolute conviction that the Trinity is the only appropriate way of expressing the being of God. What is of special importance is the author's view that the essence of the Trinitarian faith is already present in the Hebrew Old Testament and *even beyond*. Naming God as *Father*, *Son* and *Spirit* finds its antecedent thus in *word*, *wisdom* and *spirit*. Or, in other words, the OT fashioned in advance some insights into the *creative*, *revelatory* and *redemptive* functions of God in history. Whether in the order of creation or that of redemption, God always speaks and acts through his Word and in the Spirit.

God is for the author not merely "the chief player in some language games", but faith stands or falls with this belief in the Trinity. The author deals with this matter in a threefold manner:

- the historical experience of salvation that the scriptures record and interpret in the history of the church;
- the testimony of public worship; and
- the experience of practising discipleship today.

This threefold perspective can, in other words, be understood as *anamnesis*, *epiclesis* and *doxology*, or, then, as faith that seeks *understanding*, *worship* and *social justice*. It will thus attend to the *truth*, *beauty* and *justice* in creation.

For the author there is a "Trinitarian face" in the story of Jesus from the beginning to the end. The history of Jesus thus discloses God who is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The author says *yes* to the virginal conception and even establishes with it a revelatory link for the post-existence and the pre-existence of Christ. And with this he positions himself against certain scholars of New Testament research. This stance applies to his interpretation of the Logos (*versus* Sophia) in John 1:1 as well (see for example the convincing arguments of Marcus Borg in this regard).

But O'Collins deals with his subject *dogmatically*, which of course asks for an appreciation in appropriate manner. I, for one, find his line of argument very sound and am of the opinion that his suggestion rather to speak of the *Tripersonal* God shows a profound progress in establishing appropriate vocabulary in our endeavour to express our understanding of the being of God. But one could hardly rid oneself of the impression that O'Collins approaches the Bible with a preconceived notion of the Trinity. Is this a canon behind the canon? Therefore, his specific critique against Moltmann – who does the same – is the latter's *intratrinitarian* interpretation of the being of God.

