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*God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude.*

Linn Marie Tonstad. New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp. 302.

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In this densely argued book, Linn Marie Tonstad of the Yale Divinity School faults recent trinitarian theology for its speculative abstraction, gendering of God and persistent “heteronormativity.” Considering theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar, Graham Ward and Sarah Coakley, and then Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Kathrine Tanner, Tonstad shows how each fails to fully overcome Christian privileging of the sexually dominant over the sexually marginalized. The failure stems in substantial part from error in trinitarian thought, and both reflects and expresses the church’s disinclination to embrace the epistemological humility prescribed by its own story and apocalyptic vision.

*God and Difference* is rife with provocation. The author’s reading strategy depends heavily on contemporary queer studies, her lens for peering as deeply as she can into more conventional, if also creative and well-meant, theological perspectives. She speaks of the coming “abortion” of the church, by which she means its ultimate disappearance. She contrasts “clitoral” with “phallic” pleasure, associating the former with “touch without violence” (136) and finding the contrast instructive for proper Christian sensibility. At least once she pulls the f-bomb into one of her sentences. Readers may relish or stumble over language of this sort, but the substance of Tonstad’s argument deserves, in either case, careful attention. She is offering fresh perspective on the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as on the Christian understanding of “difference.” She brings such “traditional” convictions to the table as commitment to the truth of the resurrection, to theology’s dependence on revelation, and to “anticipation of the return of Christ” (2). From beginning to end, moreover, her analysis is thorough and trenchant. But as the book’s price may suggest (\$118.40), Tonstad’s prose style is laden with the trappings of esotericism, and this will prevent most non-specialists from reading her work. The book is rewarding, and it is also hard.

Tonstad homes in on the recurring theme of “hierarchy” in contemporary attempts to understand the “relations” among the persons of the Trinity. This recurrence owes in substantial part to imagery taken from the domain of heterosexism of which she finds traces even in writers, like Sarah Coakley, who disavow “the ultimacy of heterosexuality” (106). Equally problematic, she claims, is the tendency to speak of the “subordination” of the Son to Father. When Wolfhart Pannenberg speaks of the “hierarchical subordination” of the Son, Tonstad calls it a “catastrophic failure of the theological imagination” (165). Such talk seems incompatible with the idea that God’s kingdom is a kingdom “without masters and servants” (138). Insofar as scripture does speak of Christ’s subordination, subordination pertains to his hu-

manity, not to relations within the Trinity proper. Nothing in God's "immanent life" corresponds "to even the appearance of subordination" (235).

In her own constructive account of trinitarian doctrine, a major part of the book, Tonstad repeatedly emphasizes the danger of literalism. In their usefulness for insight into the divine, concepts and analogies have limits. They must not be allowed to imply masculine superiority or to fuel speculations about trinitarian origins or the precise theological meaning of threeness. The doctrine of the Trinity is a "grammar" for stating fundamental Christian commitments. It tells us that Christ reveals the divine self. It affirms God's ongoing power and glory and defines these as love. It shows that the divine purpose is the establishment of "communion" – communion such that we may be God's friends, children and siblings, and may, in our relationships with one another, transcend the "logic of hierarchy and scarcity" (243) and take true delight in one another. It is a harmful distraction to veer toward thinking that we have "*understood*" God or understood the "nature of relation in God" (237).

The book's final chapter (but for a "Postlude") addresses the way biblical apocalyptic must, in Tonstad's view, shape thinking inside the church. Here the theme of epistemological humility receives heightened prominence. The Bible envisions large-scale "reconfiguration of structures of power and exclusion" (256), and although the Spirit mediates the presence of Christ to the church today, it is also the case that Christ's ascension entails the "disappearance" of his resurrected body. We may not claim to comprehend fully the risen Christ, nor may we throw off self-doubt and suppose that our present projects and assumptions correlate with God's intentions for the future. Present ideals concerning, say womanhood or sexual identity, cannot commit us to the "self-same" down the road. The church's job is not merely to reproduce itself, or even its imagined ideal self. The church, after all, comes to an end. There is, as Tonstad pointedly notes, "neither church nor temple in the new Jerusalem, and the Lamb's presence," not an institution from today, is that city's "light" (269).

Instead of indulging its own, or its society's, "reproductive urges," the church must understand its proper role to be "the negation of the stability and viability of the symbolic order" (269). But it is just here, in connection with what she calls "epistemological apophasis" (272), that Tonstad may slip toward inconsistency. In standing against the subordination of the Son, she has earlier declared, repeatedly, that "God really is who God reveals Godself to be in Jesus the Christ" (8; cf. 226, 234). Even if we do not now see the body of the ascended Christ, we do have a record (admittedly fallible) of what the first believers remembered concerning what they took to be God's self-revelation. They saw "through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12), but still offered descriptions that go beyond the merely negative. If today Christian humility shades into sheer reticence about what Christ's followers are positively aiming for, their account, and the "revelation" that it documents, has surely lost part of its

credibility and relevance. Can a forceful witness be only witness *against*? Can an institution viable on Earth speak only of its own self-doubt and lack of knowledge?

*God and Difference* matters. Such questions, and others equally or more important, are just what such a book is meant to generate.