

Knowing the Triune God, edited by James J. Buckley

reviewed by [Roderick T. Leupp](#) in the [August 28, 2002](#) issue

Although she did not intend it to be, Sallie McFague's 1987 book *Models of God* could be read as a work of trinitarian theology. God as Mother, God as Lover and God as Friend, the models McFague develops, together carry trinitarian weight and power, if not the ontological strength needed to bring these three into One. Any doctrine as profoundly pliable as the doctrine of the Trinity necessarily needs some boundaries, something to mark off, in Jaroslav Pelikan's metaphor, a theological foul ball from a fair ball.

This learned collection of essays, which faithfully lives up to its subtitle, is such a marking off. Whether intentional or not, the structure of the book bears its own triune impress. Following an introductory essay by the editors, the book's three sections contain three essays each. The opening section, "Sources of Knowing the Trinity," is more theological in the classical sense of surveying connections between trinitarian theology and the church, the Bible and the liturgy. "Formation in Knowing the Trinity," the second section, is no less theological, but brings theological abstraction to the service of contemplation (especially Augustine's *De Trinitate*), baptism and interpretation and an up-to-date investigation of the disputed question of vestiges of the Trinity in the natural world and human consciousness. The closing section ventures into applied and ethical questions, pondering ecumenicity, the Christian response to Israel, and the treatment of strangers in our midst.

Throughout this volume the level of writing is consistently high and the research deep and sophisticated. The recently renewed wisdom that the doctrine of the Trinity is for all Christian times and seasons and for all Christians, from the working pastor to the celebrated theologian, is here tilted toward the theologian. These essays, written by theologians for fellow theologians, at times miss the stark and beautiful simplicities of trinitarian theology. The joyful play of Gregory of Nazianzus, whose ecstatic contemplation was a constant transport between the One and the Three and back again, is absent here.

To the essayists' credit, the presence of both conventional avenues of inquiry (church, Bible, liturgy) and off-the-beaten path explorations (Israel and the stranger) allows the doctrine of the Trinity to do what it does best: to encourage consensus without forcing it, to provoke wonder without at the same time provoking heresy. The winds of trinitarian doctrine are not less free than the wind of the Holy Spirit (John 3:8). On the face of it, the claim that one can be three and that three can be one is so implausible that no bland least-common-denominator approach can finally satisfy.

The one common thread interlocking the ten essays is the practical nature of the doctrine of the Trinity. Here "practical" simply means what can be grounded ecclesiastically rather than individualistically. The Trinity is a *team* doctrine from first to last, and those who wish to live by its lights must be team players. Trinitarian doctrine thus becomes cultural analysis, opposing the modern and the postmodern infatuation with subject. Reinhard Hutter's brilliant essay on the church argues that denominational models of the church inevitably place the subject before the church. Hutter proposes not a nostalgic return to "premodern" sensibilities, but a recognition of the gift of community already given by the Triune God.

This God is a God in motion. The essays move historically (offering the interplay between past, present and future), critically (providing a cross-fertilization between complexity and simplicity) and notionally (calling "lex orandi, lex credendi" a two-way street). Mostly they move practically, in a theological way. They are self-consciously catholic and evangelical at the same time, a fulsome perspective that can be sustained only by the Triune God.