

RESPONSE TO DENIS EDWARDS' "ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY: TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVES"

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Denis Edwards invites us to consider trinitarian theology as a path to ecological conversion. This is a stunning idea. There are four things that I especially appreciate about his talk: (1) his analysis of the plight of the Great Barrier Reef; (2) his efforts to retrieve insights from the Christian trinitarian traditions of Athanasius and Aquinas; (3) his engagement with modern evolutionary theory; and above all (4) his sense that ecological conversion requires new aesthetic and ethical practices. He says that it involves "a transformation in the way we see the natural world, and in the way we feel for it. It involves a change in lifestyle, a new asceticism, new priorities, and personal and communal action."¹ In this response I want to delve a little more deeply into his project by asking precisely what sort of trinitarian theology can best help us embrace these needed changes. My suggestion is that, in addition to a trinitarian ontology, in which each entity is recognized as a trace of the Trinity, we also need a trinitarian aesthetics which clarifies how different sorts of creatures are calling and crying to us and a trinitarian ethics that connects the liberating work of Jesus with environmental justice movements.

To explain why I am not satisfied merely by a trinitarian ontology, let me return to a striking passage from Edwards' talk: "Each entity, each green turtle, is a trace of the Trinity: in its very existence it points to the Source of All; in its specific identity it points to the divine artist, the Word; in its participation in an inter-relational world it points to the Spirit who is Love."² These are moving points to make about the green turtle, and making them helps us overcome the anthropocentrism that has characterized many modern interpretations of the trinitarian tradition. However, I am struck by the fact that this thomistic argument extends to "each entity." Any being whatsoever, insofar as it is a being, will be composed of existence and essence and will be situated in relations with other beings. In this sense, it will be a trace of the Trinity.

Although I do not disagree with it, I am struggling to understand how much ecological force this trinitarian ontology can have when it seems to embrace, not only endangered animals such as the green turtle, but also two other categories of beings that I would call "dangerous products of human invention" (e.g., drugs, weapons, mining equipment, carbon dioxide emitting machines, and toxic wastes) and "natural threats to survival and flourishing" (e.g., viruses, virus-spreading mosquitos, tsunamis, and crop-eating swarms of locusts). Unless we want to argue that God's generative power does not extend to items that we have had a hand in making—which would problematically undermine the noncompetitive relationship between divine and human causality—and unless we want to say that things which cause harm do not originate from God—which would lead us in the problematic direction of a Manichean ontological dualism—then we must admit that, according to such ontological reasoning, each entity, however loathsome it is to us, has a trinitarian character just by virtue of the fact that it is an entity. If green turtles warrant a different sort of caring

¹ Denis Edwards, "Ecological Theology: Trinitarian Perspectives," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 72 (2017): 28.

² Edwards, "Ecological Theology," 22.

response from us than do pollutants and viruses—and I assume that is intuitively obvious—then our search for theological warrants for such a response must go beyond the trinitarian ontology that Aquinas's theory of processions allows Edwards to formulate.

In the evolutionary part of his argument, Edwards suggests that the Spirit can be understood as the "Energy of Love" and the Word as "the Divine Attractor." He says that the Spirit's loving energy finds "beautiful expression in the Great Barrier Reef."³ Here we have an aesthetic category, beauty. When thinking about the Divine Attractor, Edwards turns not only to a cosmic Christ, understood as omega point, but also to gospel testimony regarding the "deeply personal and human way of the Jesus who attracts disciples, crowds, and children to himself."⁴ Jesus calls people to come to him. I am reminded of Jean-Louis Chrétien's argument in *The Call and the Response* that the Greek word for beauty, *kalon*, is closely connected with the verb "to call," *kalein*.⁵ Beauty attracts. A trinitarian aesthetics seems to be emerging here—an aesthetics supported as well by Edwards' visually striking slides and by many aspects of his readings of Athanasius and Aquinas. I suspect that the green turtle calls to us—or as Leonardo Boff might say, cries to us—in a way that pollutants and viruses do not. Its anguished calling, its beauty in pain which reflects Christ and the Spirit, may move us to act, if we let ourselves be moved by it.⁶

In close connection with such a trinitarian aesthetics, I suggest that we also need a rigorous trinitarian ethics that can shape and correct it. Beauty must be defined by justice.⁷ Although I do not share Kathryn Tanner's strong criticism of social trinitarianism—which for her is the somewhat unrealistic view that the Trinity's perichoretic relations of love ought to be taken as a model for inner-worldly relationships in human and ecological contexts—I do take her point that more directly following the historical Jesus' relations with his Father and his Spirit and with other creatures may be a more theologically sound and practically feasible way to relate the Trinity to ethics.⁸ In the twentieth century, liberation theologians such as Jon Sobrino and James Cone have found in this historical Jesus a clear revelation of the triune God's

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University, 2004), 1–32.

⁶ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

⁷ In this regard, I appreciate the groundbreaking achievements of Latino/a theologians such as Roberto Goizueta, Jeanette Rodriguez, and Alejandro García-Rivera, to name a few, who have shown the inseparability of beauty and justice. See Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009); Rodriguez, "Theological Aesthetics and the Encounter with Tonantzin Guadalupe," in *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Laurie Cassidy and Maureen O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 17–36; and García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

⁸ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 207–46.

preferential love for the poor and oppressed.⁹ They have heard the voice of the Trinity demanding justice, including environmental justice. Proponents of the environmental justice movement distinguish themselves from mere environmentalists by their explicit prioritization of the needs of the poor and oppressed. In this respect, they are natural conversation partners for liberation theology.

While reading Edwards' address, I found myself worrying that it may be easier for a Christian today to be attracted to the green turtle than to a darkly colored poor person who lives and dies amid the refuse of this world's racialized capitalist political economy. If this worry is at all founded, then something is terribly wrong with our aesthetics. Our perception of things has become, or remains, deeply anti-christological. It contradicts the liberating way of Jesus, which is the will of his heavenly Father and empowered by the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit. With Willie James Jennings, I suggest that we need a transformation in our Christian imagination.¹⁰ We need to retrain ourselves to respond to the darkness of a human body, not with fear and anxiety, but rather with the wonder and respect due to any human being. I long for another possible world in which black life would be celebrated not merely as a trace but as an *image* of the Trinity; I lament the fact that, instead, we live in a world in which the greatest factor predicting the siting of toxic waste dumps is the prevalence of racialized persons of color in the vicinity. This disturbing fact was first documented by the 1987 United Church of Christ study, "Report on Race and Toxic Wastes in the United States," in the early years of the environmental justice movement.¹¹ In our struggle for the all-embracing "integral ecology" that Pope Francis proposes, we need not only a trinitarian aesthetics, but also a trinitarian ethics committed to environmental justice.

I enjoy visiting the green turtle that lives at the New England Aquarium together with fish and other aquatic creatures in a large glass enclosure. Her name is Myrtle. She is approximately eighty years old and weighs more than five hundred pounds. I fear for the future of her species. But other cries are ringing loudly in my ears right now too: those of the poisoned men, women, and children of Flint, Michigan; the cries of the poor who are forced to live in trash heaps, as in the Gramacho dump in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; the cries of the Standing Rock Sioux protecting their sacred lands from the Dakota Access pipeline; and the cries of the many families in low-lying coastal regions, such as the island nation of Kiribati, whose homes and lives are imperiled by the rising waters of climate change. How to hear all of these cries—human, animal, and more—and to respond with care? That is the question for me. I do believe it is, at some level, a question of trinitarian theology—but my further question is precisely what sort of trinitarian theology?

⁹ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005); and James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 110–28.

¹⁰ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2010).

¹¹ Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University, 2001), 21.