

SEMINAR ON THE TRINITY

This year's seminar included both speculative and mystical perspectives on the Trinity. Leo J. O'Donovan began by summarizing and critiquing the concluding section ("On the Humanity of God") of E. Jüngel's trinitarian theology.¹ There Jüngel develops an ontology of love which completes his hermeneutical reflections in earlier sections of the book. God is to be thought as love; God is the unity of life and death for the sake of life. Jüngel takes Lateran Council IV's definition of analogy ("Between God and creature there is ever greater dissimilarity in any similarity") and turns it around: between God and creature there is ever greater *similarity* in such a great dissimilarity. This is made manifest in God's absolute selflessness as love, both *in se* and *pro nobis*.

At the outset of Jüngel's at-times very moving reflections on love, he reminds us that we should not differentiate God and love ontologically. Love is the event of a still greater selflessness within such great self-relatedness. Love transforms the very structure of having; I "have" myself only by surrendering myself to my beloved. The lover exists only *from* the beloved; death (and possible annihilation) is thus always a part of the experience of love.

God alone can begin to love without any reason. In that God comes from God, God has always been the one who loves (Father). God also differentiates him/herself in that God loves him/herself; God is lover *and* beloved, Father and *Son*. The *history of love* is also God as such: God is *Spirit*.

Jesus is the vestige of the Trinity. God addresses us in history, in the word, in the cross. Theology narrates the story of Jesus Christ as the Crucified One. As an event of love, God identifies with Jesus; thus God's own self happened on the cross. This is where we learn of the self-differentiation (of love) within God.

God's being is in coming: from God, to God, as God. God is origin, goal and mediation. One implication Jüngel draws from all of this is that the existence of the creature is a necessary entailment of God's love for Godself.

O'Donovan raised the following questions: the relationship between narration and analysis, historical and discursive thought seems unclear, even if they are held together by a dialectical method. Second, how exactly does Jüngel think God's being, if not as ground of being? Third, to what extent is Jüngel proposing a social analogy for the Trinity; he seems less dependent in the final section on H. Mühlen. Fourth, is God the origin

¹ E. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); see also L. O'Donovan, "The Mystery of God as a History of Love: Eberhard Jüngel's Doctrine of God," *Theological Studies* 42 (1981), 251-271.

of being and time? Fifth, given the emphasis on a theology of the word, is the word addressed to all of human history or to only part of it? Lastly, if being and time are to be reconciled, what is the relationship between God's love and God's power?

Group discussion raised the following questions: what is the role of the Spirit in Jüngel's theology, other than as bond of Father and Son? What are the limits of a *theologia crucis* in contrast with a *theologia gloriae*? Is the life of Jesus adequately handled? What does it mean to say that God "mediates" Godself to Godself? Does this confuse person and nature? And finally, why favor humanization over divinization?

The seminar then turned its attention to "The Trinitarian Imagery of Catherine of Siena," a paper presented by Suzanne M. Noffke. Catherine's thought is not easily "systematized"; Catherine was a mystic and a pastoral figure rather than a theologian. Still, theological questions do arise from observing patterns in her terminology and prayer.

Catherine's *Dialogue*, 382 dictated letters and 26 prayers (extant) exhibit trinitarian imagery and terminology. In the *Prayers*, in which we find Catherine's most spontaneous and mature thought, the maxim *Lex orandi lex credendi* is especially true.

Catherine is markedly 'intellectual' and 'dogmatic' in her prayer (e.g., "O divine nature, you raise the dead and you alone give life . . ." [P. 23]), though her technical vocabulary is limited. One of the more unusual images she uses for God is that of a banquet. The Father is the table, the Son (incarnate) the food, the Spirit waiter/servant. Catherine's own relationship with the triune God centered on Christ, though she frequently referred to herself as daughter of "God the Father."

Noffke's presentation focused on the following questions:

(1) Should one differentiate between what are for Catherine simply assumptions and definitions, and what are areas of personal insight or intellectual grappling? For example, she assumes that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, but there is no evidence that she ever entered into any *filioque* debate. She did, on the other hand, struggle with the relationship between Jesus as "him crucified" and the eternal Trinity.

(2) How does Catherine's experience in prayer relate to her perception of God as triune? What if her synthesis goes beyond or contrary to the theological systems that were part of her "patrimony"?

(3) How does Catherine progressively relate to God as Trinity? In her earliest years she seems to relate predominantly to Jesus as companion and spouse-to-be, and to God in a vague and unspecified way. Toward the end of her solitude she begins to relate to God specifically as Father. By the last months of her life, each of the three persons, differentiated according to specific attributes, is present to her in prayer.

(4) What can Catherine's language tell us about her perception of God as triune? Similarly, what do her images reveal about her experience of the triune God?

(5) What are we to make of her equation of "God" and "Father"?

Participants discussed for some time some features which might be unique to mystical experience. Do Christians, strictly speaking, have an experience of "the Trinity," or do they experience "God" but use trinitarian language and symbols to account for the experience? What is the relationship between mystical experience and language about the experience? What might this tell us about mystical experience in other religious traditions? The group agreed that mystical and religious experience is an indispensable source for trinitarian reflection, and would like to pursue this theme in subsequent years.

The second day of the seminar was devoted to chapter 2, "Creation and Incarnation," excerpted from Joseph A. Bracken's systematic theology entitled, *The Triune Symbol*.² Bracken presented a person- and community-oriented reinterpretation of the traditional Christian doctrines of creation and incarnation along neo-Whiteheadian lines. All of creation, but especially the human community, exists as part of the communitarian life of the three divine persons. That is, the Father as the source of all life and being expresses himself perfectly in the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit; but he also expresses himself in creation which is thus part of the total reality of the Son. The Son, in turn, responds to the Father in the power of the Spirit; part of this response is the praise and glory given to the Father by creation as a whole, but above all by the human community. The Son, moreover, by his incarnation became intimately involved in what was formerly just a part of his ongoing relationship with the Father and the Spirit. He became a part of creation and a member of the human community presumably at that moment when he was first able to communicate his person and message to larger groups of people, and thus to decisively influence the direction of human history. Everything in creation and indeed the universe as a whole exhibits a basic structure of existence and activity which is ordered to union with Christ and, through union with him, to worldwide community. Every individual entity, in other words, is a dynamic unity in totality of functioning parts or members, and is by the same token ordered to still another totality of which it is itself a member or part. On the level of human life, this means that human beings are ordered by nature to life in community, and that communities in turn are ordered to ever more comprehensive social groupings, until one arrives at the ultimate community, the human race as such. It is this community of which Jesus is the head and through which he gives unity and direction to the creative process as a whole.

In his formal response to Bracken, Donald Gelpi expressed agreement that we need to conceive God on an analogy with human social experience; that the attempt to think of the hypostatic union as the finite human experience of being a divine person offers some exciting possibilities; that a panentheistic understanding of the relationship between God and world has precedent in the Christian tradition; that the spatio-temporal process transpires within the eternal divine process.

² J. Bracken, *The Triune Symbol* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1984).

Gelpi questioned, however, whether Whitehead's metaphysical atomism leads to an inadequate conception of the unity of the human person; is the continuity of human experience illusory? With respect to the sociality of human experience, how can we really relate to one another if we are only configurations of successively perished data? Thirdly, can the Whiteheadian dipolar theory of knowledge sufficiently account for the human enterprise of interpretation? Finally, is there really continuity between divine and human persons? Is either the resurrection or the future thinkable in Whitehead's system? Is a graced, free relationship thinkable, or does God "need" the world and *vice versa*?

The discussion which followed focused on the following questions: How is creativity a divine act of being? Is a community of three persons too intimate to be a model of the worldwide complex of society? Is incarnation the human experience of being a divine person (or the divine experience of being a human person)? How is Jesus unique as an enactment of God? Why is the Holy Spirit the "self-effacing" person of the Trinity?

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