

CONTEMPORARY TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

DIFFERENCES AND AGREEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY TRINITARIAN THEOLOGIES

Presenters: Michael J. Scanlon, Villanova University
Michael Downey, Bellarmine College
Ted Peters, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Joseph A. Bracken, Xavier University

The Contemporary Trinitarian Theology workshop discussed recent publications of Joseph Bracken (*Society and Spirit*, Associated University Press, 1991), Elizabeth Johnson (*She Who Is*, Crossroad, 1992), Catherine LaCugna (*God for Us*, Harper, 1991), and Ted Peters (*God as Trinity*, Westminster, 1993). The panel, moderated by Barbara Finan, included Bracken, Peters, Michael Downey (representing LaCugna) and Michael Scanlon (representing Johnson). Discussion among the approximately sixty-five participants (including Johnson and LaCugna) followed.

In his reflections, Michael Scanlon noted that Johnson's primary focus is on the portrayal of the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse—with the Trinity a special case for the illustration of the semantic and pragmatic power of feminist symbolism in pointing toward God. Central to Johnson's work is her focus on Sophia as the most developed biblical female symbolism for God. For Johnson the symbol of the Trinity (Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, Mother-Sophia) evokes a livingness in God, a dynamic coming and going with the world that points to an inner divine "circling around" in unimaginable relation. Avoided here is any tendency towards subordinationism; central is the effort to secure an understanding of God as a profound relational communion (a communion or relation about which we cannot speak without reference to Sophia's loving involvement in the world). In explicating the divine mystery of relation for us, Johnson endorses the paradigm of panentheism artfully illustrated through the image of a pregnant woman. The being of God is the "unimaginable livingness" with and for others.

Scanlon offered an elaboration of Johnson's trinitarian thought. The biblical story of divine freedom in commerce with humanity and the world, when coupled with our historically conscious understanding of human freedom as our ability to create ourselves with and through others, suggests that God's freedom (like and unlike ours) is God's ability to become the kind of God she wants to

become. Our history, according to Scanlon, is simultaneously God's history, and the fruit of this history is eternity. God defines freedom as fidelity to us. This fidelity to and for us is that made possible by the so-called (once-called?) immanent Trinity. In *reality*, says Scanlon, the immanent Trinity is the eschatological Trinity—God in the world and the world in God, the new creation, God all in all.

Ted Peters acknowledged the influence of several contemporary trinitarian theologians and briefly discussed two key ideas of his own perspective—relationality and the question of time and eternity. Of the former he underscored the fact that personhood—human and divine—is to be understood in terms of relationality. Relational (interdependent) identity implies dynamism, change, passage—and time. In commenting on how the relational identity of God implies time, Peters showed how time and eternity parallel the economic/immanent distinction. His model for imaging these relationships is that of the finitude/infinity dynamic. Since the finite is within infinity, the two cannot be simply contrasted. In a similar manner temporality is within eternity. The identity of Father, Son and Spirit is relational and eschatological; it is yet to be fully achieved.

Michael Downey reminded the group that the guiding principle which shapes LaCugna's work is that the mystery of God (*theologia*) can only be thought of in terms of the mystery of grace and redemption (*oikonomia*): the God who is is God for us. Downey highlighted LaCugna's relational ontology and noted that the understanding of human personhood rooted in a trinitarian ontology of personal relation is one that enables us to see that we are what we are only insofar as we are from others and for others.

Most pertinent were the questions raised by Downey. Is there at the heart of LaCugna's work an overly optimistic view of relationality? Downey reported that he sees in the lives of the mentally handicapped persons with whom he works not only the theonomous character of human personhood described by LaCugna, but also a "dark" side which burdens and blesses their relationships with what he calls "the vitality of the negative." Downey also asked whether it would be helpful to articulate more clearly that the Trinity is less a paradigm *of* human relationality, and more a paradigm *for* human relationality. Would it be preferable to speak of the Trinity as a horizon of ideal personal relation, something toward which we are moving? Finally Downey asked how LaCugna can safeguard personal individuation in her view of the relational. To what in ourselves do we give expression in relationship? Downey suggests that the answer lies in the Spirit of Christ.

Joseph Bracken summarized his social model of the Trinity by situating his approach alongside that of Johnson, LaCugna, and Peters. He noted that all of the books being reviewed focus on relationality and community among the divine persons and see the involvement of the divine persons in human history as central. With regard to the latter Bracken suggested that the four approaches share a process orientation—in the broad (non-Whiteheadian) sense of the term. In delineating the differences among the authors, Bracken identified that which he

considers the distinctive insight of each: Johnson's focus on Holy Wisdom as She Who Is (with affinity to Aquinas' He Who Is) and the divine persons as Wisdom's different manifestations; LaCugna's focus on God the Father as the font of the Trinity and world process; Peters' location of temporality in God and the resultant eschatological Trinity. In addition Bracken assigned these theological projects an inherent heterodox risk: to Johnson's an implicit modalism; to LaCugna's the danger of subordinationism and the incorporation of divine life (without remainder) into world process; to Peters' a similar subordination of God to cosmic process; and to his own the danger of tritheism. Later discussion among participants led Bracken to admit that such labeling may not be especially profitable.

Bracken commented on his own efforts to ground the unity of being in a common unifying activity which emerges out of the interrelated activity of the divine persons. This field of activity (the divine nature) is shared with all God's creatures and thus renders possible a truly panentheistic understanding of the God-world relationship.

Comments and questions from participants clustered around several key themes: the relationship of language and worship; the diaphanous, iconic character of trinitarian reflection; liturgy as the required access road to trinitarian talk; the relative merits of creation and redemption as the paradigms for trinitarian theology; implications for Jewish-Christian dialogue; the power of theology to draw us to intimacy with God (and not simply to provide us with models for intimacy with one another); the One and the Many; the need for theological rigor in discussing the *doctrine* of the mystery of God.

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