

Living Out the Trinity: A Mennonite-Feminist Theology of Diversity and Community

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ABSTRACT

This essay affirms the Trinity as a valuable frame for conceptions of God. Informed by feminist methodology and norms, and favoring orthopraxy over orthodoxy, the author is most concerned with the living, relational experience of the divine. The divine community can encompass and weave together diverse perspectives, experiences, and identities.

I had just finished preaching through a worship series on Names for God, concluding with a sermon on the Trinity, when I received the invitation: Would I be willing to engage John Rempel's essay on the Trinity from a pastoral perspective?¹ Well, how could I refuse? So, I gladly took up the torch that Rempel has thrown to the next generation to ponder the significance of the Trinity in and beyond the church today. As a Mennonite-feminist theologian and pastor, I was pleased to discover that he engages prominent Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson, among others, on the Trinity. This is laudable for its rarity—too often, feminist theologians remain absent from such lists, even when their work is highly relevant.² Rempel makes no such omission, choosing to include her voice within his comprehensive survey of radical-yet-orthodox Trinitarian theologies.

Rempel's intriguing thesis is that the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is flexible enough to allow for radical innovation within accountability to tradition (111). Thus he places feminist and Mennonite theologies side-by-side as radical theologies that approach the Trinity from their respective

¹ This essay is a response to John Rempel, "An Impossible Task: Trinitarian Theology for a Radical Church?", *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 110-145. Page references to Rempel's essay appear in parentheses.

² See Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "Yoderian Messianism Isn't My Cup of Tea," in the following symposium: <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/messianic-political-theology-and-diaspora-ethics/>.

places on the margins of the history of theologizing (132). I follow him in placing them there, in close proximity, and in reaffirming the Trinity as a key doctrine, capable of being engaged by and making room for radical theologies. But my theological method diverges significantly from Rempel's. While his work makes the case that Mennonite theology remains in continuity with the sacramental, classical theology of the early church creeds and councils—rooted mainly in Nicaea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.)—my interpretation of contemporary Mennonite theology is informed by feminist methodology and norms. While I reach a similar conclusion—that the Trinity remains a valuable frame for Christian conceptions of God—I get there via a decidedly different route.

Starting with Rempel's engagement of Johnson, my response will explore a feminist theological method in more detail, tracing its commonalities with Mennonite theologizing. I will then use this Mennonite-feminist lens to sketch some of the theological, spiritual, and ethical implications of a metaphor for Trinity that resonates with both streams of theology: Trinity as Community.

Johnson's Feminist Theological Method

Rempel admits that he makes his critique of Johnson's theology of the Trinity "cautiously" because of his "conscious and unselfconscious male biases" (136). I likewise make my critique of Rempel cautiously, realizing that I am likely undermining the very criteria by which he includes her in his list of contemporary Trinitarian theologians. Nevertheless, in my view he holds Johnson accountable to norms and a theological method which she does not apply to herself. Rempel claims that her rejection of the traditional satisfaction theory of the atonement amounts to "a caricature of the Biblical evidence" and that "she is violating the Trinitarian grammar central to the Catholic tradition." In addition, he views her as possessing a "commitment to the normativity of Nicaea," although her reimagining of the Trinity using divine Sophia is "stretching the inherited categories of thought as far as she can without breaking them" (137). But in evaluating her work in this way, Rempel does not sufficiently analyze the distinctly feminist theological method and norms to which Johnson holds *herself* accountable.

In *She Who Is*, Johnson's project is not, as Rempel implies, to recover

and apply a Nicaean understanding of the Trinity to the contemporary context. Rather, it is closer to the inverse: she begins with feminist norms and engages classical theology only insofar as it “could serve a discourse about divine mystery that would further the emancipation of women” today.³ She is clear that “a feminist hermeneutic” is primary, given the “profoundly ambiguous” legacy of classical theology in the lives of women, which has been both the grounds of “exclusion and subordination” and a “source of life” that “sustained generations of foremothers and foresisters in the faith.”⁴ Thus she begins with the feminist and liberationist norm of historical, socio-political experience, rooting her reimagining of the Trinity in its reflection of Christian religious experience across the centuries; this is where she locates its “truth” and its continued relevance:

[T]he Trinity is a legitimate but secondary concept that synthesizes the concrete experience of salvation in a ‘short formula.’ Without attentiveness to this rootedness in experience, speculation on the Trinity can degenerate into wild and empty conceptual acrobatics.⁵

This emphasis on concrete, historical experience and on encounter with God as the basis of theologizing leads Johnson to identify three interconnected problems with the doctrine of the Trinity in its present form: it is disconnected from experience, it has been literalized, and it has been used to legitimate the marginalization of women in its reification of both maleness and hierarchical relationships within a framework more Neoplatonic than biblical.⁶ Her solutions further reveal her reliance on feminist norms as she reconceives of the Trinity in terms of the biblical divine name of Holy Wisdom or Sophia, which she argues “evokes a sense of ultimate reality highly consonant with the feminist values of mutuality, relation, equality, and community in diversity.”⁷

While Nicaea pointed in the direction of equality, Johnson argues, it

³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 197-98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 192-94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

is ultimately inadequate on its own to sever the close ties between patriarchy, empire, and Roman Catholic orthodoxy.⁸ This is why she turns instead to feminist values and various contemporary reimaginings of the Trinity. These foster liberation in much more direct ways, not least through the diversity of experiences they reflect, since feminists are particularly attuned to “the insight born in pain that a monolithic position inevitably works to the disadvantage of somebody, usually the most powerless.”⁹ She highlights Gordon Kaufman’s Trinity of “God’s absoluteness, humaneness, and present presence,” Sallie McFague’s “God as mother, lover, and friend of the world which is God’s body,” Dorothy Sayers’s God as “a book, thought, written, and read,” as well as her own Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia.¹⁰ These renewed images for Trinity render the doctrine meaningful in the sense of reflecting and emphasizing “mutual relation,” “radical equality,” and “communal unity in diversity.”¹¹ She concludes that “The mystery of God as Trinity, as final and perfect sociality, embodies those qualities of mutuality, reciprocity, cooperation, unity, peace in genuine diversity that are feminist ideals and goals derived from the inclusivity of the gospel message.”¹²

Given that these are Johnson’s articulated norms—those to which she holds herself accountable—how might her work be evaluated from an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective? While Rempel is undoubtedly more knowledgeable than I am about the origins and history of our shared tradition, it’s not difficult to find commonalities between contemporary feminist and Mennonite theology and praxis. Both arose as protest movements that used a hermeneutics of suspicion against the dominant hierarchies claiming to mediate between the church community and God (mainline Catholicism and Protestantism, and/or (hetero)patriarchy). Mennonite and feminist ecclesiologies often resonate as well. Both ecclesiologies emphasize communal discernment and hermeneutics (reading and interpreting the Bible, theology, and ethics through dialogue and in community); an egalitarian, anti-hierarchical discipleship based on positive theological

⁸ Ibid., 209. Cf. 194. I would add heteronormativity.

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ Kaufman, McFague, and Sayers are referenced in Johnson, *She Who Is*, 210.

¹¹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 222.

¹² Anne Carr quoted in *ibid.*, 223.

anthropology (everyone is made in God's image, and discipleship in the Way of Jesus is possible because sin and violence do not have the last word); and orthopraxis (right action or lived faith, often including a peace ethic) over orthodoxy (right belief, often enforced by violence).¹³ It is difficult to characterize two anti-hierarchical traditions that are by definition decentralized, voluntary communities. Nevertheless, in light of this significant common ground between Mennonite and feminist norms and theological methods, it becomes possible to look more closely at one of Johnson's reimagined metaphors for the Trinity, in order to see a Mennonite-feminist theological method in action. I now turn to her image of the Trinity as community to parse its implications for our theology, spirituality, and ethics.

Trinity as Community: A Mennonite-Feminist Interpretation

Karl Rahner once joked that the Trinity is so far removed from ordinary people's faith that "if people were to read in their morning newspaper that a fourth person of the Trinity had been discovered it would cause little stir."¹⁴ The pastoral and theological task thus becomes how to make the Trinity come alive, able to spark the spiritual and theological imagination of people within and beyond the church. I agree with Rempel that the Trinity is able to encompass both a rootedness in the tradition as well as a radical theology and ecclesiology, but I would lean with Johnson into innovative renewing of our language for the Trinity versus emphasizing fidelity to Nicaea. In keeping with a feminist and Mennonite emphasis on unmediated encounter with the Divine and orthopraxy over orthodoxy, my pastoral approach to the Trinity is not primarily concerned with our speech and thinking about God staying beholden to an ancient philosophical formula¹⁵ but with articulating and sparking a living, relational experience of the Divine. We may call this

¹³ See Lydia Neufeld Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1998), ix, 2, 5, 8; Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Peace Theology in Transition: North American Mennonite Peace Studies and Theology, 1906-2006," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 81, no. 1 (2007): 78, 80-82; Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63, no. 2 (1989): 173, 176.

¹⁴ Paraphrased in Johnson, *She Who Is*, 192.

¹⁵ See Malinda E. Berry, "A Theology of Wonder," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 14.

approach “radical mysticism” in Dorothee Soelle’s sense of the term.¹⁶

The question which is often put to me, ‘Do you believe in God?’, usually seems a superficial one. If it only means that there is an extra place in your head where God sits, then God is in no way an event which changes your whole life. . . . We should really ask, ‘Do you live out God?’ That would be in keeping with the reality of the experience.¹⁷

Our guiding question thus changes from Rempel’s *Is the Classical, Nicæan doctrine of the Trinity conceptually compatible with radical theologies like Mennonite and feminist and liberationist?* to *How do we practice and live out the doctrine of the Trinity today? How can the Trinity be embodied in and beyond the church today?* This starting point is concrete, incarnate in history, pastoral, and ethical in its emphasis. Accordingly, I do not set out mainly to think about God rightly, but to articulate lived encounters with and mystical experiences of God incarnate in the everyday and often on the underside of history. The image of the Trinity as a Community speaks powerfully to this starting point.

The Divine Community

Envisioning the Divine as a Triune community signifies that God encompasses oneness and diversity, unity and difference, within Godself. This radical theological statement dethrones the imperial and theistic notion of God as the almighty, singular heavenly patriarch who is wholly other (as in “superior” or “at the top of the cosmic hierarchy”).¹⁸ In its place, we find a God who is in relation, whose identity is relationality even within Godself—a God who is quite simply Love. Along these lines, Mennonite-feminist theologian Malinda Berry revives the image of Trinitarian relationships as

¹⁶ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 11. She speaks of “democratizing mysticism”—i.e., rendering encounter with God accessible to everyone and incarnating God in peacemaking.

¹⁷ Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 186.

¹⁸ This theistic God is often critiqued by feminist theologians, including Johnson, *She Who Is*, 19-20, and Dorothee Soelle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the “Death of God,”* trans. David Lewis (London: SCM, 1967), 130-34.

divine *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity, sometimes depicted as a dance. This “suggests the partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, comprised of . . . an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.”¹⁹ For Berry, this reimagined image gives the church “theological tools to dismantle the male edifice of God,”²⁰ leaving us with God who instead reifies mutuality or reciprocity, equality, and relationality that neither erases nor merely recognizes but creatively celebrates difference and diversity.

The Trinity as Community also functions, in Johnson’s words, as a “short formula,” reminding us of the multiplicity of experiences of the Divine, as reflected in the Bible, where multiple names for God are preserved without ranking or literalizing them.²¹ The Trinity as Community is thus shorthand for the diversity of experiences of the One God throughout history and today. To offer just one biblical example, Pentecost depicts God the Spirit becoming present to the gathered community of Jesus’ friends in multiple ways: as a strong wind, as tongues of fire, and as the ability to speak different languages (Acts 2:1-4). This Triune depiction of God does not conform to the orthodox notion of the persons of the Trinity but nevertheless holds together the oneness and many-ness of the Divine as we experience and encounter our God.²² This God is decidedly hospitable, reaching out to embrace and include us in the divine dance and inviting a diversity of people to participate in God’s community.

Community as Image of the Divine

If the Trinity is a perichoretic divine community, then it is not only as individuals that we image God but also as human communities, including the church. This is not to say that any kind of community images God. Rather, human communities image the divine community when they reflect the same characteristics of the perichoretic dance: mutuality and reciprocity, relationship that celebrates diversity, anti-hierarchical equality, and radical hospitality. These distinctives shape the everyday life of our communities, and

¹⁹ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, cited in Berry, “Theology of Wonder,” 22-23.

²⁰ Berry, “Theology of Wonder,” 22.

²¹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 198.

²² Johnson also encourages not literalizing God’s “Oneness” and “Threeness” in *ibid.*, 204.

make a statement about our theologizing, namely that our thinking about, search for, and wrestling with God is best done with others, in community. Diverse voices and experiences are needed to inform our worship and theoethics, as both feminist and Mennonite theologians affirm in emphasizing hermeneutic communities and a priesthood of all believers (a “discipleship of equals”).²³

Returning to Pentecost, we see that even when the gathered community encounters the divine, it is not a uniform or identical experience for everyone. The Holy Spirit comes upon all of those gathered in its Triune form, and each of them prophesies, fulfilling Joel’s words that all different people will receive the Spirit (Joel 2; Acts 2).²⁴ As this diverse group prophesies in multiple languages, we see the Spirit crossing and re-crossing multiple boundaries, overturning hierarchies of all kinds—between slaves and free people, between genders, between generations, and between cultures and ethnicities. With this diverse community united in peace and right relation as our image of God, it becomes impossible to justify the various hierarchies and systemic, structural sin with which we live as human beings. This is not only non-hierarchical but actively anti-hierarchical in privileging mutuality and equity as central to the identity of the divine community and our imaging of it. Thus, “every kind of hierarchy, exclusion, and pattern of domination, whether religious, sexual, political, clerical, [or] racial”²⁵ is ruled out as God’s will for our life together.

This is not an abstract or gratuitous form of diversity, but one that privileges marginalized voices because its purpose is liberation.²⁶ The image of Trinity as community specifically resonates with postcolonial, Indigenous, and Third World theologians, making it particularly conducive

²³ See Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

²⁴ Berry also mentions this passage in passing as she discusses the Trinity as a Dance. See Berry, “Theology of Wonder,” 23.

²⁵ LaCugna, quoted in *ibid.*, 22.

²⁶ “[N]either a feminist liberationist nor a biblical-exegetical discourse of meaning can rest with the play of multiple meanings, languages, and images. Rather their interest in survival and liberation compels both discourses to evaluate critically the play of images and meanings and their pre-constructed kyriarchal frame of reference ... to produce change and transformation.”—Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 120-121.

to liberative theologizing. For instance, Chung Hyun Kyung speaks of Asian women viewing God as a community, affirming that to be in the image of God is “to be in community,” reflecting “interdependence,” “harmony,” and “mutual growth.”²⁷ Similarly, Cayuga (Six Nations) theologian Adrian Jacobs emphasizes the Spirit’s move toward a diversity of languages at Pentecost as poignantly relevant for Indigenous experiences of cultural/linguistic revival and decolonization, since here and in Isaiah 2 God values and preserves many languages and cultures.²⁸ And postcolonial feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan contends that hybridity, multiplicity, and even “fruitful ambiguity” are nothing new in Christian theology and can be traced back to the very notion of “Jesus/Christ” and the “inclusive” and “pluriform” christologies already apparent in the New Testament.²⁹

Thus, in imaging the Trinity as divine community and aiming to live out this image together, we hold open the possibility of learning from those whose voices have not historically been heard, drawing on ancient threads of tradition that resonate anew as the good news of liberation in our time and place.

Dorothee Soelle has made the case that the “death of God” can be viewed as an opportunity in contemporary theology rather than a crisis. The god of theism—absent and apathetic in the face of our suffering—is dead and perhaps always was. In its place, we can now find God who “lives for us and with us.”³⁰ I have tried to address this opportunity in the present response, using trajectories noted in Rempel’s essay, such as understanding God as relational; fostering dialogue between theological innovation and strands of tradition; holding ethics, worship, and theology together; and engaging with feminist and other liberative theologies. I hope I have shown how we can all be transformed and liberated through this dialogue by holding vulnerable and sustained conversations across difference, held and encouraged by the

²⁷ Chung Hyun Kyung, “To Be Human Is to Be Created in God’s Image,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 253. Some of this is Chung quoting Philippine theologian Elizabeth Dominguez.

²⁸ Personal conversation with Adrian Jacobs, March 30, 2016, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, MB. He is Keeper of the Circle at the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre.

²⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 171-72.

³⁰ Soelle, *Christ the Representative*, 130, 132-134.

divine community, which is wide enough to encompass and weave together our diverse perspectives, experiences, and identities. As we often sing:

Praise the Maker, Christ, and Spirit, one God in community,
calling Christians to embody oneness and diversity.
This the world shall see reflected: God is One and One in Three.³¹

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³¹ Iona Community, "Praise with Joy the World's Creator," *Sing the Journey* (Scottsdale, PA: Faith & Life Resources, 2005), #16.