The Scandalous Drama of Trinitarian Theology for a Radical Church

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Abstract

The theological vision of Julian of Norwich (1342-1423) is thoroughly Trinitarian yet scandalously radical in its implications. Her theology is compatible with the "vernacular mysticism" that influenced the Radical Reformation, but it will require Anabaptists to commit to the biblical witness that goes beyond conventional doctrinal or traditional logics.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, I was always amused when walking past the Unitarian church in Hyde Park to see that on the steeple was not a cross but a classic weathervane, complete with a rooster.[1] Aha, I thought, what better symbol for a tradition unanchored by the incarnational unity of the crucified messiah with the one God than one that is "buffeted to and fro by every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14)—a weathervane moored to a cock! Imagine my surprise when I later learned that in the ninth century Pope Nicholas made the cock official as a symbol of Peter's betrayal of Jesus that should be displayed in all churches, and that many did so in the form of weathervanes on steeples. Was the pope being pious, ironic, self-critical, prophetic? Nicholas was also instrumental in expanding papal power (and Petrine political primacy) in Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire in the heart of Christendom. These are the strange ironies, perhaps even paradoxes of language, iconography, and tradition: On what is Petrine authority and primacy founded? Why are Unitarians so patently or ironically faithful to that traditional symbolism? What is the unity that holds the key to the "one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord,

[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): 110-45. Page references to Rempel's essay appear in parentheses.

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one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4f.)?

It is a privilege to respond to John Rempel's essay on the highly controversial question of the Trinity: How can three persons (Father, Son, Holy Ghost; Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit) be one God? I agree with Rempel's claim, negatively stated, that Trinitarian theology is not inherently conservative nor need it be aligned with violence (though it must engage with the questions of violence if it is to be related to the Cross as atonement). And also, positively stated, that an unruly but accountable Trinitarian grammar may be the source of a radical ecclesiology that practices a sacrificial servanthood of nonviolence. Rempel rightly relates the Trinity to the "Eucharistic drama" of the "Lord's supper" which incorporates its participants into the messianic body of the Incarnation. From the beginning of Christian scripture, this will entail participation in the messianic scandal of the eternal Word made flesh, an impossible mixing of categories that violates all rational realisms—a principle first expressed in Plato's *Symposium* 203a: "no god mingles with human beings,"[2] a realism shared by our fellow monotheists who regard Trinitarian Christians as idolaters. The ancient Romans considered Christians to be atheists for worshiping a human being as divine, and (post) Enlightenment philosophers would agree—it is dangerously superstitious to use theological language in such unprincipled ways. One can hardly blame such skepticism, given our shared world and its complex histories.

These differences cannot be sorted out structurally or logically or doctrinally—only dramatically and in living language tied to daily embodied sacramental practices. I agree with Rempel about that, if this is what he is saying. Interestingly, while many (post)Enlightenment Christian theologians who are often intellectually embarrassed by theological language (like Gordon Kaufman) would like us to stop using theological terminology, such as Trinity, eternal life, virgin birth, and resurrection, another post-Enlightenment tradition of dramatic thinking (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Blake) agrees with Plato and other existential thinkers that we

[2] My translation of *Theos de anthropo ou mignutai*, based on Augustine's *nullus Deus miscetur hominis*, in *City of God* 8.18, 20; 9.1, 16. Against Plato's principle of erotic mediation, Augustine insists on the Trinitarian scandal of messianic mediation: only the divine Word made flesh can liberate us from bondage to disordered love.

cannot do away with mythical and dramatic languages in coming to terms with the mysteries of our lived reality. The big existential, social-political, and ethical question remains: By which drama/s and figural enactments will we orient and live our lives? This, as Rempel rightly insists, is the critical question regarding truth, beauty, and goodness, and above all, I suggest, it entails asking what, whom, or how will we *love*?

At the heart of the Trinity lies the drama of kenosis, incarnation, cross and resurrection in which, the New Testament writers consistently proclaim, we are called to become participants if the world is to be "saved." What could this salvation possibly entail, and why is it a vision of true health and well-being for the whole world, and not simply a religious, political, or academic power game played by Christians?

Consider the narrative of Peter, who betrays Jesus out of fear or embarrassment. In Matthew 16 he is given the revelation of Jesus' identity as the Messiah, "the son of the living God" (early Trinitarian language), and Jesus blesses him and gives him the "keys of the kingdom" that binds and looses in heaven and on earth. That binding and loosing has to do with forgiveness from sin (Matt. 18:15-22), but immediately after this lofty "revelation" from the "heavenly Father," Peter rebukes Jesus for saying that his messianic mission requires crucifixion and not coronation. Jesus curses him: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a scandal to me, for you are not on the side of God" (Matt. 16:23). In other words, the revealed "doctrine" neither saves Peter nor provides him with the "interpretive key" to theology as a whole, any more than the revelation of God's name to Moses in Ex. 3:14 does: "I am who I am//I will be who I will be." The revelation of the hidden God's identity entails a wilderness journey of complete, utterly vulnerable faith (cf. Heb. 11-12).

Augustine in his extensive reflection on the Trinity and theology suggests that the key to interpretation is not *scientia* or "*gnosis*" knowledge but *caritas* or *agape* love, revealed above all in "the form of the servant" in Philippians.[3] Here he agrees with Paul in 1 Cor. 8. The ground of

[3] See Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill, Works of Saint Augustine I/11, Book I (New York: New City Press, 1996); Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, Works of Saint Augustine I/5 Books I-IV (New York: New City Press, 1991). The "power of caritas" is brought to perfection in the "weakness of humility."

messianic authority regarding divine agency and character—the Trinitarian grammar—is less conceptual than existential, a process of formation by following the revelation of a mystery in complete lived obedience. Here I see a strong connection with the "*nachfolge Christi*" of the Anabaptists, in contrast to the doctrine of the Trinity as a set of rules and concepts for correct understanding. I'm not finally sure where Rempel takes his stand on this Pauline-Augustinian hermeneutical key. With Paul, Augustine, and the early Anabaptists, I'm less moved by creedal formulations of Trinitarian grammar than by dramatic accounts of the logos becoming flesh (John 1) by not clinging to divine identity (the *kenosis* of Phil. 2).

This is not to reduce theological affirmations to "ecclesiological assumptions." Quite the contrary, as creeds can also be so reduced! Here I disagree with John Howard Yoder's approval of the movement from Sophia to Logos—as if this is an either/or logic. I'm more open to feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson and Julian of Norwich. The Trinity is a lived economy into the dynamic movement of which we are invited as participants, not a conceptual logic that sorts things out at the level of formal "belief." I think the latter emphasis is more an inheritance of neo-scholastic orthodoxy and Enlightenment liberal Protestantism than of the radical Anabaptist path of monastic (not necessarily celibate or cloistered) discipleship lived out in the everyday world through the mystical body of Christ becoming conformed to the divine image in a social-communal process of deification, a thoroughly existential Trinitarian drama. Augustine's profound reflections on the psychological image of the Trinity (the inner *imago Dei*, the silent Word) is not individualistic and private; rather, it is closely related to the "exemplum" of Christ as a fully social, embodied, relational, indeed cosmic and apocalyptic, revelation of the divine economy that nevertheless remains a mystery.[4]

Here I will turn to the first female vernacular (not doctrinal) theologian of the English-speaking world, from whom Augustinians and Anabaptists could learn a few things, namely Julian of Norwich (1342-1423) and her *Revelations of Love*. Her theological vision is thoroughly Trinitarian

[4] See Travis Kroeker, "Augustine's Messianic Political Theology: An Apocalyptic Critique of Political Augustinianism," in *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics: Essays in Exile* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), chapter 3.

yet scandalously radical in its implications for Trinitarian theology in our own time no less than hers—not least because she remains very closely and existentially attuned to the dramatic center, the cross of Christ. Julian includes an extensive allegory on the Lord and the Servant, based upon the kenotic hymn in Phil. 2 and the second Adam's reversal of the first Adam's fall—which she extends to the *kenosis* of Mary and the central images of womb and tomb in her visions.[5]

Julian also offers a striking vision of the redemptive passion of Christ for the world. This vision makes her "laugh greatly," recognizing that attunement to the great pain of the world (its sin that causes such suffering), sought out and felt with compassion by all who follow in the path of divine redemption, is the result of participating in a great love. We should not fear this pain but rather rejoice that we can still feel it. Life itself is still present in this point—a womb, a cross, and a tomb, the pathways of everyday human natality, suffering, and mortality where kenotic death may become another birth in which the logos made flesh is kept alive in a world on the point of death. Julian also includes a vision of at-one-ment with the divine Trinity that "knits together" not only Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but also relations such as mother, spouse, and lover in a communion including (as Paul also says) "all things" in an intimate union where there is no violence and no wrath, only love.

Such a vision of atonement as kenotic compassion has real political theological implications that will not allow church or state to use the cross as an instrument of violence based on fear, obsessive attention to the sins of others, or retributive punishment of those who disagree. For Julian the cross is precisely an instrument of retributive justice as public torture designed to instill power as fear. It reveals a punitive rejection of Jesus, whose everyday, non-professional life was devoted to embodying divine love of all, especially the despised victims of power games who are labeled and shunned as sinners, enemies, outcasts, criminals, and heretics. Julian's vision also scandalizes by revealing that the Trinitarian God of relations also includes a community

[5] *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, Long Text, chapter 51, the basis for her extensive elaborations in chapters 52-63. See *Julian of Norwich: Showings* (Classics of Western Spirituality), trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978).

of divine names, not only fathers and sons but also mothers, lovers, and daughters. Indeed, Jesus symbolized as the "Word made flesh" cannot be understood otherwise, since Mary is completely and intimately involved from the beginning! Not only Mary (and the son knitted together in her womb) but "all things" are being "at-oned" in a process in which God and the whole range of relations entailed in divine love, from the greatest to the least, will erase all human-all-too-human distinctions of power, hierarchy, nobility, and rank in the mysterious completion of divine Trinitarian love.

There are two related striking and highly subversive scandal claims in Julian's dramatic and visionary account of the Trinitarian grammar. The first claim is that sin is literally a "nothing" that underlies the problem of evil and that generates violent attempts to solve it. Augustine also saw this, but Julian radicalizes it with laughter, scorn, and consolation: The "fiend" representing the power of sin/evil is decisively overcome in divine love. Yet God in love has created a cosmos in which sin as negation and pain/suffering is always possible as a refusal of love, a pain that love is willing to accept ("suffer"). This acceptance is revealed above all in viewing sin as "behovely," as Julian puts it, befitting the drama of divine love in which God's very being is willing to suffer the pain of love without "solving" it in practices taken up by the devil, whose power is focused on fear, wrath against sin, and a blaming or vengeful mode of justice that refuses the patience of resistance as "waiting." But this waiting is anything but passive; it is a highly challenging practice of knowing that we must constantly work to unknow the powerful illusions that deny the cosmic claim that suffering love overcomes evil, not violent attempts to wipe it out in a final solution. The cross for Julian is not a symbol of divine wrath; she says vehemently (in the Long Text, chapters 48-49) that in God she sees "no wrath." The wrath is all on the human side and rooted in both a deception about what should be feared and a narrative of retributive justice—in which the Satan/devil/fiend is an expert.

However, that leaves us with a problem, Julian suggests. Christ on the cross, if not a symbol of triumph in a narrative of retributive justice and imperial power based on his sacrifice, must then be a symbol of failure: the suffering of God-abandonment by God's messianic servant being put to death (this is what scandalizes Jesus' immediate male disciples). It seems to intensify a narrative of failure, the failure of divine love so understood. In his

death Jesus is not only in an agony of physical suffering but torn apart by an experience of seemingly being abandoned in his hour of greatest need—not only by his disciples but by God ("My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"). The fiend seems to have won the narrative war, and the actions of so-called Christians that come later seem to prove it in word and in deed. They turn the practices of knowledge in the church into exactly the kind of power games that put Jesus to death, and for the same reason: focusing on fear of sin and evil-doing, trying to find a political-religious solution to the problem by getting rid of it, and possessing just authority and the success that comes with it. Julian claims that this narrative misses key aspects of the revelation, and that Mary and the other female lovers of Jesus are perhaps closer to its true meaning.

The second scandal claim is not only that the revealed God is a Trinity of relations as Augustine says but that the community of names for God includes not only fathers and sons but also mothers, lovers, and daughters. The God who enacts the overcoming of sin/evil in the form of the servant even unto death, mediates this both in the son and in the female servant Mary, who consents to his birth in her womb and is present in the final suffering of his death. Jesus symbolized as the word made flesh cannot be understood otherwise, since Mary is completely involved. Not only Mary but "all things" are being "knitted together" in a process of at-one-ment in which God will erase all distinctions of power, hierarchy, nobility, rank—it will be "all God" in its completion. God is Father, Mother, Lord, and Servant, and more, beyond all containment or possessive naming.

How does this knitting or joining together in the "divine body" come about? With a good deal of social subversion and gender bending? No, but through divine love: humble, vulnerable, unafraid of sin/evil, patient (willing to suffer), and unwilling that anything, even the smallest part of "all things," should remain unloved in practices of com-passion. Here Julian cites the terms of previous Christian thinkers (Augustine, Anselm, Revelation, Paul, Matthew) as well as Jewish and Hebrew texts. Just as this revelation does not belong only to her, and the Hebrew scriptures do not belong only to Jews, "the body of Christ" does not belong only to Christians. All are contained in a larger memory and drama that finally goes beyond containment even if always experienced in a spatio-temporal point. God as Mother is not

contained by gender; in fact, the revelation subverts strict gender-based identities as the ground of knowing, since this ground contains "all things" and the only access to it is by giving up our ego as the point of containing knowledge. In the end, suggests Julian (Long Text, chapter 73), the divine drama of atonement will heal us from two kinds of sin-sickness: *impatience*, which leads to an anxious search for solutions rather than an ability to endure or be patient, the root of com-passion (waiting for divine love); and *despair*, an obsessive attention to suffering and death to the point of hopelessness rather than practicing gifts of humble love in the divine point of presence in the everyday.

I believe Julian of Norwich's Trinitarian theology is compatible with the "vernacular mysticism" that influenced the ecclesiologies of the Radical Reformation, which envisioned "the body of Christ" as a kind of "monasticism in the world." However, it will require Anabaptists to become more radical in committing to the figural drama of the biblical witness that goes beyond conventional doctrinal or traditional logics in the service of the scandalous divine love for a sinful, suffering world.

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