Reply to Respondents

Impossible: Trinitarianism and a Radical Peace Ethic?

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Abstract

In engaging with seven respondents to "An Impossible Task: Trinitarian Theology for a Radical Church?" the author observes that several affirm, enrich, or extend his argument, while others pose significant challenges to it. He re-affirms the mystery of God, the limitations of language, and the importance of the Nicene model.

I am honored that seven theologians wrote such probing and challenging critiques in a collegial spirit.[1] That all the critiques are Trinitarian not only offers us a common starting point for theologizing but also shows the distinctiveness, for good or ill, of Nicene Trinitarianism. The challenge before me here is to select a few trains of thought in each of my interlocutors that have made me think twice in relation to the Nicene model I had proposed, with a social Trinity as the central paradigm. Some took exception to my logic or method, while others found the substance of my thesis unpersuasive. Still others affirmed the direction of my thesis by expanding arguments I had made from the vantage point of their discipline. My procedure below will be to engage two or three postulates of each writer, bearing in mind the two questions that guided my thinking as I prepared the original lecture. First, does Nicene Trinitarianism provide an entry point to the Bible that is unique, a grammar that is dynamic enough, a model that is capacious enough, to accommodate new contexts? Second, does it preserve and prosper images of God that make pacifism a likely interpretive key of the Gospel?

Travis Kroeker's quarrel is not with 'doctrine' as such, as his love for Augustine's theology attests, but with harnessing the insights of theological

[1] This essay is a reply to respondents who engaged with the author's essay, "An Impossible Task: Trinitarian Theology for a Radical Church?" That essay and the responses appear in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 2 (2019): 110-207.

inquiry to "a conceptual logic that sorts this out at the level of formal 'belief.'" (149) Am I not grasping the fullness of Kroeker's case, if I respond by agreeing that "the dramatic accounts of the logos becoming flesh" is the Event, and Julian of Norwich's spirituality is the experience of the Event? If we keep the ranking clear—first the Incarnation, then our participation in it—then our articulation of doctrine seems to be the inevitable articulation of the meaning of the Incarnation. Doctrine is the servant. If it remains true to the Event that inspired it, it has the necessary vocation of addressing the affirmations and questions arising from the Christian's experience of the Event. I think Kroeker is arguing that the Event, the Gospel, is subversive and scandalous in a way that bursts out of any systematic articulation of it. That's why I say doctrine is the third dynamic of Christian identity. But even "vernacular mysticism"—whether of Julian, the Waldensians, or the Anabaptists—allowed for doctrine's tertiary but essential place in the Christian scheme of things.

I like the pithy phrase early in Andrea Saner's response: "Trinitarian grammar clarifies what is expressible" (154). It reminds us that the mystery of God is beyond human expression yet there is enough divine self-revelation for us to live by. I accept Saner's counsel to attend more seriously to the Scriptural character of the doctrine of the Triune God. Her contrast between the exegetical method of David Yeago and John Howard Yoder is illuminating at several points. She rightly notes that I remain unsatisfied with Yoder's judgment that the Nicene Trinity arises only because of an intellectual difficulty. But she enriches my grasp of Yoder by illustrating his theological method by means of his reading of Philippians 2. In it she traces a theological process in which the on-the-face-of-it interpretation of the noun 'form' yields to insights from other biblical writers, and concludes with the less obvious but cumulative meaning of 'pre-existence' in early Christological formulations (158). Saner claims that the "doctrine of the Trinity requires continual returning to the text of Scripture" (161). My approach would be to set two claims side by side. One is Saner's, urging that Nicene theologians be totally honest when they go back to individual Scripture passages. The other is my own, namely that no subsequent engagement with the threesome-ness of God can say less than Nicaea, although it can say more.

In her skilled examination of Hubmaier's and Marpeck's

Trinitarianism, Breanna Nickel makes an incisive assertion: the former's conviction is expressed most fully in his tripartite anthropology, whereas the latter's is grounded in his Christology (167). Nickel marshals evidence to conclude that Marpeck's overemphasis on Christ's humanity "renders the Trinitarian Godhead more distant and harder to assess" (168). Context is important here. Marpeck focuses on the humanity of Christ because Christ's true and enduring human nature was under fire from Marpeck's fellow radicals, the Spiritualists. I suggest that his imbalance has a valid pastoral reason. Marpeck acknowledges this in the latter part of his *magnum opus*, *The Response,* where he repeatedly refers to the Trinity as his foundational reference point.[2] I welcome Nickel's insight that both theologians are Trinitarian not simply as an inherited framework but because it provides explanations for the divine/human relationship in their own theologizing (169). In conclusion Nickel wonders whether my defence of the ongoing validity of past "particular" Trinitarian interpretations stands up to scrutiny (170). On the positive side, she acknowledges my attempted correlation of ecclesiology, ethics, and doctrine. The challenge her conclusion leaves with me is to search the dominant and dissident tradition for better models for each generation's creativity in relation to its accountability.

Sarah Johnson rightly moves the discussion from scholarly abstractions to pastoral concretions. Since "speech about God is ever more concentrated on the Sunday assembly. . . . What is Trinitarian worship for a radical church?" (171-72). I will comment on possible implications for a number of Johnson's topics. First is the debate about creeds in recent Mennonite hymnals. The editors of the 1969 book use 'affirmations of faith' to include any public, corporate profession of faith without an explicit priority other than that the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds come first. I affirm Johnson's point that creedal language "articulate[s] Trinitarian deep structures" and "stretch[es] the *historical memory* of the church" (176). The matter of "cognitive assent" is tricky. While creedal language is not a set of rational propositions, it is making truth claims. I'm attracted to her suggestion (and examples) that Mennonites might be more receptive to sung responses that

[2] Johann Loserth, Pilgram Marpecks Antwort auf Kaspar Schwenckfelds Beurteilung des Buches der Bundesbezeugung von 1542 (Wien: Carl Fromme, 1929), 135, 144-45, 532-35, 549-53.

resonate ecumenically and use poetic language faithful to the original text.

Suzanne Guenther Loewen makes her starting point my premise "that the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is flexible enough to allow for radical innovation" (180). We both agree that in principle Mennonitism and feminism meet the criterion of communities of dissenting creativity that nevertheless remain accountable to the Trinitarian confession of God. But, as she Loewen says, her theological methods and mine diverge. First, she asserts that I wrongly hold Elizabeth Johnson "to norms and a theological method which she does not apply to herself" (181). Guenther Loewen lists Johnson's three interconnected problems with the inherited doctrine of the Trinity: "it is disconnected from experience, it has been literalized, and it has been used to legitimate the marginalization of women" (182). While theologians sometimes get lost in abstractions, the intention of Nicene Trinitarianism is to show precisely that it is God's relational nature that lets us experience God That is why the process leading to the Creed insisted that the Holy Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is a "person." One source of this claim is Paul's picture of the bond between God's Spirit and our spirit, especially in Romans 8. Secondly, Johnson (and Guenther Loewen) fault the church for taking Nicene language literally. I agree. Doing so is an abuse of the theological method behind Nicaea. However, I find the evidence convincing that the limits of language and its analogical nature in talking about God were inherent in the mindset of the doctrine's framers and later exponents. This is most profoundly true of Gregory of Nazianzus. Third, the Creed's hierarchical view of the world and God has been used to marginalize women. This is true. At the same time the 4th-century picture of God behind Nicaea asserts, particularly in the East, a dynamic mutuality among the three persons of the one God as the counterpoint to hierarchy. In *God for Us*, Catherine LaCugna incorporates this mutuality into feminist theologizing.[3]

According to Guenther Loewen, leading feminist theologians like Johnson and Soelle have taken this notion of God's mutuality in a "post-theistic" direction. This concept has been variously interpreted but it generally stands in contrast to "theism," a useful shorthand for the orthodox picture of God, characterized by transcendence and immanence. I raise two

[3] Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1973), 288-305.

questions concerning this radical shift in models for talking about God: one has to do with method, the other with substance.

As to method, while feminism and Mennonitism share aspects of context and stance, I disagree that they have the same paradigm (183-84). To go back to origins, Anabaptism was a diverse, communal movement. But at its most crucial turning point—exceptions aside—it did not take the path of its radical siblings, Spiritualism and Unitarianism, but remained consciously Trinitarian. The principle I take from this defining choice is that the Anabaptist path of dissent realized that in and of itself it could not preserve the Gospel. It could do so only in common with the dominant tradition, for all the ethical and ecclesiological wrangling this brought with it. In my essay I tried to show that beginning with the Enlightenment, when Mennonitism broke away from its rootedness in the long tradition, it endangered both its theological and ethical moorings.

As to substance, I question the haste with which Guenther Loewen identifies theism with a God who is wholly other and absent from the world. I take it that the gist of post-theism, as she sees it is the overcoming of this perceived estrangement of God and world. But for Nicene orthodoxy, the paradoxical overcoming of God's absence with his presence is the genius of Trinitarianism. Much more is at stake here than meets the eye. This is evident from the stance of dissident theological examples that Guenther Loewen affirms. In Gordon Kaufman's thought the divine is a benign process and explicitly not a "person" to whom we can pray. Soelle describes the 'god of theism' as absent and apathetic. Instead, in her later writings, she takes refuge in a form of mysticism that her critics would say forfeits the "personhood" of God. Having made this argument, I still wonder if Guenther Loewen and I have missed the heart of each other's stance.

Obviously, I cannot do justice to Jeremy Bergen's erudite presentation in a few paragraphs. His chief worry is that my approach instrumentalizes the doctrine of the Trinity. His stress on "method, doctrine, and stability" (191ff) rings true to me. Rather than grounding the church's way of imagining and believing in God in a doctrine of God, Bergen grounds the nature of theology directly in the reality of God. The one is metaphysical, the other is experiential. He points out that James Reimer and Denny Weaver both root their way of theologizing in the being of God expressed doctrinally

but make quite different deductions from it. Bergen concludes that "to place any doctrine at the center will be a human effort" (193). Is the church's and the Christian's experience of God's "reality" less characterized by human limitation? My counterpoint is that the source of doctrine is God's self-disclosure recorded in the Bible to Israel and the church. Tradition, in the deep sense, is the work of the Holy Spirit faithfully guiding the church to re-articulate that truth in new contexts. This process is fallible but includes moments of transformative clarity like Nicaea and the church's much belated condemnation of slavery. Bergen uses Robert Jenson's felicitous phrase "irrevocable developments in the Spirit" (199) to say what I am trying to say with the term "moments of transformative clarity." Maybe holding both notions side by side can create a bridge between our approaches.

Bergen accurately summarizes my comparison between Galenus Abrahamsz and Thielemann van Braght, but disputes my conclusion. He wants to see if and how Abrahamsz's and van Braght's positions are correlated with the doctrine of the Trinity, and contends that other convictions about belief and practice shaped their positions. I haven't studied this 17th-century case enough to argue one way or the other. When Bergen moves to the 19th-century case study, it seems to me that the subjectivism built into liberal theology unintentionally makes doctrine the primary means of the church's faithfulness and experience the secondary one. The subjectivism and reductionism of 19th-century Mennonite church life (congregational autonomy and individual conscience as final reference points) opened the way for departing from both ecumenical and Mennonite tradition. Especially after the recent exodus of conservatives from Mennonite Church Canada and USA, are we in danger of the same reductionism?

At the same time, I heed Bergen's warning that for over 1500 years holding to "a Nicene doctrine of the Trinity itself [is] not enough to ensure any particular ethical stand" (195). It is the church in its experience of God that applies doctrine: how it does this depends on what kind of church it is. Mennonite ecclesiology, Bergen suggests, has instability built into it (195-96). Historically, Mennonites would have agreed with Anglican theologian Maurice Wiles**.** Isn't the Mennonite teaching—that baptism is the enactment of a believer coming to faith and the church as the body of those who have done so—an act of restoring "the experiential ladder"? I welcome, as

Coakley says, "an inherent reflexivity in the divine" into which the church and the Christian are drawn. I resonate with the doctrine of the Trinity as the insistence that God is identified by the sacred narrative (199). But God is more than that. Bergen turns to Jenson for a framework of the church's experience of God's reality as the basis of ecclesial stability and doctrinal integrity, two essential aspects of the model I am advocating (199). For this approach to be convincing we need to know more concretely what beginning with "human speech" and the "reality of God" looks like (199).

Andrés Pacheco-Lozano begins where Bergen left off, by applying a Trinitarian grammar concretely to the pursuit of peace and justice, especially as expressed in the World Council of Churches' Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace (PJP). Pacheco-Lozano offers an understanding of the church's *koinonia* as participation in the Triune God (201). According to peace theologian Fernando Enns, this reality consists of a dynamic unity among theology, non-hierarchical community and the ethic of nonviolence. Bringing together the building blocks of such a Trinitarian architecture is both ambitious and laudable. It is a viable alternative to the common, if well intended, model in which Christology is often reduced to Jesus as teacher, for lack of a Trinitarian structure with a fuller Christology. Pacheco-Lozano's contrast between "activist" and "healed healer" (206) clarifies the difference between the two. With reference to Moltmann's Triune paradigm, the proposed model has a robust picture of God as creator, as the Incarnate One, and as the Indwelling Presence, who is at work in the creation, the church, and the world. However, although the place of the church is implied, little is actually said about the church as covenanted believers in whom this experiment in nonviolent community is incubated over and over again. This grounded and engaged *ecclesia* would be a corrective to the practice of being church in both established and free churches.

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