

THE LOGIC OF ORIGIN AND THE PARADOXES OF LANGUAGE: A THEOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT

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A polydox theology starts from the insight, as Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider state in the introduction to *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*, that “multiplicity itself has become theology’s resource,” unexpectedly and “miraculously” transformed from “liability” to “friend.”¹ Polydoxy values “multiplicity, the evolutionary uncertainty it unfolds, and the relationality that it implies” in its understanding of divinity as well as in the resources it uses to interpret that divinity (Keller and Schneider, “Introduction,” 1). A response to *Polydoxy*, like the practice of polydox theology itself, must then operate in variegated registers. A Christian theology that recognizes the differences among its own sources while remaining faithful in its commitments to, in Marcella Althaus-Reid’s terms, the God whose back is made of difference,² will necessarily be an open-ended theology. After all, the most firmly established canon of Christian interpretation is that Christians do not agree on it. Christianity is *always* polydox, as the authors of *Polydoxy* remind us (Schneider, “Crib notes from Bethlehem,” 21). As a theological method, polydoxy does not then transplant the practice of Christian theology into strange territory, despite its recommendation of “[a] responsible pluralism of interdependence and uncertainty” against Christian theology’s apparent insistence on singularity in its approach to the uniqueness of its divinity (Keller and Schneider, “Introduction,” 1). Valuing polydoxy rather than

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¹ Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider (eds), *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1, emphasis in original. Subsequent references to *Polydoxy* will be cited internally according to author, title, and page number.

² Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 16.

denying its existence permits theology to confess its pluriform nature openly rather than insisting on its own monofidelity.

Many feminist, womanist, and queer theologians have refused to submit fully to the disciplinary constraints of systematic theology, even as their projects are driven by visions of the God-world relation that are systematic in a slightly different sense. Highly legitimate concerns about phallogocentrism, Eurocentrism, and totalization combine with the influence of methods derived from social and cultural theory to render feminist, womanist, and queer theologians skeptical of the viability and desirability of systematic projects. Systematization implies the establishment of a structure of interpretation; if what is being interpreted is both in motion and structured by differentials of power, viability, and recognition, then attempts to develop such a structure may be false and implicated in injustice. Indeed, theology has in many cases not merely permitted but actively promoted the dehumanization of its racial, sexual, and religious “others”. Whether expressed through Audre Lorde’s agenda-setting challenge regarding the suitability of the master’s tools for dismantling the master’s house or in Althaus-Reid’s invocation of women philosophers who live with broken hearts, many theologians have come to believe that the models and methods of classical systematic theology simply cannot be adapted to good use; at best, they may be redeployed mimetically, ironically, and absurdly for deconstructive and liberative purposes.³

To write theology as a queer and feminist theologian with a dogmatic orientation raises the question of whether these different discourses—queer theory, feminist theology and theory, and systematic theology—should be brought together despite the ambivalent and often antagonistic relations they have with one another. Is it possible to claim identifications (not identities) like “queer” and “feminist” and yet to come out as a lover of dogmatics? Or must dogmatic loves be sacrificed on the altar of the need to shift Christian discourses into non-dogmatic spaces for the sake of the future of queers, women, and the earth? The authors of *Polydoxy* answer the latter question with a qualified “no.” *Polydoxy* comes to view inside, and at the unstable boundaries of, Christian contexts and commitments, and serves as a theological method of faithful engagement with multiple discourses. It provides a road map for the development and analysis of theological proposals that discover their friends in unexpected encounters.

Polydox theology’s high valuation of uncertainty, openendedness, and relationality implies that its dogmatic proposals are offered in non-dogmatic

³ See Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, ca: Crossing Press, 1984 [2007]), 110–113 and Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*, 48: “the obliteration of filiations, that sense of love towards the master’s narrative which is so difficult to avoid and creates so many broken hearts amongst women philosophers.”

fashion (see Faber, "The sense of peace: a para-doxology of divine multiplicity," 51). A non-dogmatic approach to dogmatics suggests that theological statements are offered in experimental mode. Exploring a dogmatic proposal concerning a particular theological topic or claim then requires testing it or experimenting with it to see what consequences it entails, whether in the mode of foreclosure or in the mode of possibility. Such experimentation might take the form of examining its implications for other dogmatic loci, as classical systematic theology habitually does. Theological proposals can also be tested for their plausibility, consistency, or viability from other directions. In practice, the outcomes of theological experiments result from complex negotiations between author, reader, argument, and genre. These results are discovered only in the performance of the experiment, and not all experiments yield conclusive results. Not even the discourses that claim for themselves the most generous apportionment of God's deposit of authoritative reason in humankind can determine *a priori* the possible results of employing different methods, taken perhaps from outside theology, to interrogate, fructify, enliven, or reshape theological proposals.

Given the antagonisms between systematic theology and queer theory, for instance, a theological experiment that makes use of such methodologies in a serious fashion may involve forms of interrogation, examination, and mimetic re-reading that may seem unregulated by disciplinary canons—even absurd. Yet the performance of such theological experiments engages affective registers not usually available to the dry conventions of systematic theology, making the familiar strange again and re-presenting the shocking nature of Christian doxological claims. As Laurel Schneider argues, laughter and parody are "profoundly serious" ways to shift the relations between "triumphal arches, solemn processions and avowals of holy innocence in the midst of genocidal advances and purges" (see Schneider, "Crib notes from Bethlehem," 21).⁴ Even in the form of parody, absurdity can be a way to touch the holy aslant, in the very sites in which the holy (re)presents itself. Absurdity may also protect against the "desiccation" that follows theology's assumption of the success of its own definitional categories (Schneider, "Crib notes from Bethlehem," 28–9). Clinging to impropriety may serve as a form of reverence before a mystery that cannot be contained and locked down, no matter how hard we try (and try we do) to take refuge from wonder's terrifying and alluring depths in "hypercertainties" (Rivera, "Glory: the first passion of theology?" 174). But, as Catherine Keller writes, the "doctrinal protect[ion of] uncontrollability . . . knows its own incapacity to know the infinite" (Keller, "Be a multiplicity: ancestral anticipations," 95–6). From this direction, one role impropriety plays in theological systems is as a reminder

⁴ Schneider also emphasizes that theology's refusal of humor is accompanied by "over-reliance on apodictic and deductive modes of reasoning," 21.

of language's non-transparency to God. The always-riven linguistic materiality of theological reflection displays its wounds and incapacities as a form of faithful piety.

In this article, I perform such an experiment on a particular claim in contemporary trinitarian theology, that God the Father is *most truly* father in such a way that divine fatherhood is neither a human projection nor tainted by association with patriarchal or inadequate forms of human fatherhood. I test the viability and plausibility of this claim using methods taken from feminist and queer theory as well as from classical systematic theology, moving from more recognizable genres of systematic theology into modes of absurdity and mimesis taken from feminist and queer theological genres. The examination of the logic of transcendence that theologians assert on behalf of divine fatherhood opens up into a rereading of the trinitarian imaginary that clarifies other ways in which the trinitarian persons come to be gendered.

This article thus makes three arguments in tightly interwoven fashion. The first argument, expressed in the most general terms, is that an experimental approach to theology that tests dogmatic claims using methods taken from outside theology nonetheless may serve as a valuable test of the success of theological assertions and of the means by which theological claims achieve their ends. In this case, the primary claim being tested is an oft-repeated assertion in contemporary trinitarian theology, even on occasion among theologians who purport to maintain feminist commitments. The second argument reflects the particular claim being tested. I show that the way four theologians develop their cases for the truth and transcendence of divine fatherhood preserves and indeed tightens the connection between divine and human fatherhood—a connection which all four theologians seek to avoid. This argument expands into a rereading of trinitarian structures of kinship, in which I show that symbolic divine gendering is the result of multiple trinitarian grammars, not simply or even primarily the maleness of some of the divine names.⁵ The third argument is structural. This article uses different genres to make two different kinds of arguments. While either type of argument *could* stand on its own, their interrelation strengthens—or so I propose—the power and the persuasiveness of each. If the reader is persuaded that the arguments are stronger together, the implication of the structural argument is that both classical systematic theology and feminist and queer theology may become better—more persuasive, more alluring, more truthful—if classical systematic theologians learn from feminist and queer theologians what realistic tests of their own proposals require, and if feminist and queer theologians take the forms of assertion and argument on which classical systematic theology depends more seriously than is sometimes the case. Doing the detailed work of engagement with classical theological discourses

⁵ It is worth emphasizing that my argument here is neither that *all* father-language for God is projection nor that God must *never* be named "Father."

while throwing up admittedly experimental theological proposals may do something to further a transformation of systematic theological discourse such that “feminist” theology would become indistinguishable from “Christian” theology—which, for a confessional feminist Christian theologian like myself, is an orientation of desire. The practice of polyfidelity to these divergent discourses means that these allegedly “particularist” theologies can no longer be relegated to the margins of Christian theology as supplementary additions to an already set field of discourse.⁶ Instead, feminist, womanist, and queer visions can and must reshape what counts as the field of systematic theological practice.

Experimental theology

In a polydox Christian theology that values multiplicity, the God of whom theology speaks takes trinitarian form. It is telling that three of the thirteen essays in *Polydoxy*—Keller’s, Thatamanil’s, and Lee’s—focus in some way on the—or a—trinity, and particularly on the positive potential of the Spirit. The argument below will support this sense of the Spirit’s potential. But the trinity does not lend itself easily to the ends that many contemporary theological projects seek. Such ends are well expressed by John Thatamanil: “One conviction that drives the resurgence of trinitarianism is the notion that trinity offers a promising resource for social ontology. If to be is to be in relation, then there is no clearer paradigm for that contention than the trinity itself” (Thatamanil, “God as ground, contingency, and relation: trinitarian polydoxy and religious diversity,” 239). While Thatamanil rightly identifies the reason for much recent interest in the trinity, I am unconvinced by the second assertion, and in general about the usefulness of trinitarianism for the development of a social ontology. If to be is to be in relation, which is irreducibly true of all human experience material and social—and there is no immaterial and asocial human experience—then we do not need the trinity to discover the priority of relation. What we purport to learn of relation from the trinity is better learned elsewhere.⁷ For us, the question of what *sorts of* relations we are in becomes much more pressing than the bare assertion of relationality itself.

The authors of the essays in *Polydoxy* already know that the fundamental question is the shape of relation rather than its facticity (see, for example, Betcher, “Take my yoga upon you: a spiritual pli for the global city,” 68–70).

⁶ I borrow the term “polyfidelity” as a name for the theological method of polydoxy from Althaus-Reid, who distinguishes polyfidelity from “a familiar biblical contractual model [in which] the relationship with the ‘Jealous God’ of Israel is linked to particular forms of understanding property and the body as property”; *Queer God*, 128–129.

⁷ In recent theology, this argument has been made most forcefully by Kathryn Tanner. See especially chapter 5, “Politics”, in *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 207–46.

But the case for trinitarian relationality as a promising site for theological reflection has been made in myriad other registers as well. Indeed, systematic theologians have generated bookcases full of text on the trinity's promise in recent decades. That promise has primarily been oriented toward the bettering of social relations, but it has by no means been limited to that realm. Truth, revelation, theological epistemology, liturgical fidelity, self-sacrifice, obedience, the undoing of sexism, God's identification with the suffering victim, and the presence of the future in history are all themes that have been grounded in trinitarian dogmatics in such works. The revealed knowledge of the triune God has promised the undoing of sedimented logics in Christianity's intertwining with injustice, ontological hierarchies, and the love of the one over the love of the other. But diagnosing the ways in which trinitarian theology continues to serve hierarchies of gender and sexuality is a task not yet completed in the canons of systematic theology. Such diagnostic engagement may provide support for the constructive re-readings of Christian and other traditions that dominate the *Polydoxy* volume.

Multiplicity, open-endedness, and uncertainty are values that serve to hold open dogmatic claims in anti-idolatrous fashion. Incongruity, experimentation, and mimesis are all forms of idolatry-critique within Christian thought. Mimetic incongruity (doing theology askew, with respect to both method and predication) is a constantly moving resource for indicating theology's failures and the absurdity of its own attempts to speak God; it also grounds theology in biblical traditions of language use (God as rock, for instance) and in the confounding of the wise (1. Cor. 1:27). Indeed, twisting language beyond its everyday usage is intrinsic to theology's practice in its most classical forms. Concepts are taken from non-theological discourses and "skewed" for the theological purposes for which they are adopted,⁸ while retaining some of the initial registers of meaning that render the terms appropriate to their theological adaptations.⁹ Language has been purged sufficiently for theological use only after undergoing such redefinition. This kind of speech, in its juxtaposition of incongruous images for God, serves as a kataphatic practice of theological apophaticism: the proliferation of speech in service of speech's failure to capture its referent.¹⁰ Even so, such language still has to be tested in its concrete deployment to see whether the relation

⁸ Thomas Aquinas argues that while some terms may be predicated of God substantially, their mode of signification still derives from creatures. *How* the terms mean is distinguished from *what* the terms mean. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part I, QQ. 1–26, Fathers of the English Dominican Province (trans), second edition (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1912), Ia, Q. 13.2, Q.13.3 and Q. 13.6 (where Aquinas's *sed contra* is Eph. 3:14–15, to which we return below), 152–56 and 162–64.

⁹ See Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005 [reprint]), 26–7 and 54–5.

¹⁰ Here I follow Denys Turner, as in for instance "Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason", in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16–18.

between a term's ordinary uses and its theological valences is sufficiently askew to prevent the accidental importation of the very aspects of the term's definition its theological twisting is intended to rule out.

Any test of the relation between theology's uses of a term and its ordinary meanings must then also take place inside a theological imaginary on the level of its *Wirkungsmittel* (the means by which it enacts its effects)—not just through its philosophical and theological definitions and distinctions, but also according to the images that enliven it. The metaphorical and imagistic registers of a theological project regularly overtake its stipulative limitations. When theologians insist that Jesus' physical masculinity grounds a symbolic system in which only males may act *in persona christi*, while the theological significance of femininity is limited to creation's consensual acceptance of a divine initiative, for instance, no insistence that "these symbol systems do not imply gender hierarchy or inequality" can trump their establishment in fact. Such factual hierarchies need to be identified and combated through the development of alternative proposals that point out the theological failures on which these hierarchies depend. But imagistic registers often function with greater effectiveness precisely because their power is not utterly subjected to the discipline of definition in the theological task. Interpretations of the symbolic system of a theological imaginary need not then limit themselves exclusively to the denotative register. Since those images and rhetorical strategies illustrate, vivify, and make plausible theology's stipulations, they must be read also on their own terms, especially to see where and how they transgress the limitations imposed by the definitional usages to which they are responsible.

Yet such transgression of the stipulative limitations of theology also requires serious engagement with the ways in which theologians defend themselves against the apparent implications of the proposals they advance. Taking the technical distinctions of classical theology seriously does not mean uncritical acceptance of the existing, always contested, discursive structures of the field, but it does require showing precisely how, where, and why those distinctions fail or require revision. Doing the detailed work of engagement is only in part a tactical move made necessary by the disciplinary conservatism of theology. The systematicity of theology is a site of positive power as much as of failure, and its value can neither be denied nor overwritten by fiat. Absurdity and impropriety might thus serve as productive ways to determine where technical distinctions fail, or require redefinition. Yet staying on the level of the absurd is not enough by itself. Absurd misreadings of theological technicalities might subsequently undergo a second translation back into the sober idiom and genre of theology, generating new skew(er)ings, new stipulations, and different relations among the very technicalities just subjected to the test. These reordered technicalities may also be brought to bear inside constructive theological systems on their own, without their strange histories being visible at first glance. Thus the heavy burden of orthodoxy's sedimentation, lightened by the lever provided

by the slanting language of absurdity, sits less revengefully on the theologian's bowed shoulders.

So much for how this article makes its argument and why it makes it in such fashion. Let us turn to the experiment, which moves from the genre of classical systematic theology into increasingly absurd and incongruous mimetic registers in the development of its argument. The conclusion then returns to the sober genre more typical of systematic theology to suggest some implications of the experiment for constructive trinitarian theology.

The transcendent Father and his others

If the phallus *must* negate the penis in order to symbolize and signify in its privileged way, then the phallus is bound to the penis, not through simple identity, but through determinate negation. If the phallus only signifies to the extent that it is *not* the penis, and the penis is qualified as that body part that it must *not be*, then the phallus is fundamentally dependent upon the penis in order to symbolize at all. Indeed, the phallus would be nothing without the penis. And in that sense in which the phallus requires the penis for its own constitution, the identity of the phallus includes the penis, that is, a relation of identity holds between them. And this is, of course, not only a logical point, for we have seen that the phallus not only opposes the penis in a logical sense, but is itself instituted through the repudiation of its partial, decentered, and substitutable character.¹¹

Christian theologians say that to address God as "Father" is not to claim that God is a father *like* any other; to say that God is Father is to say that God is a father *unlike* any other. God's fatherhood entails neither maleness nor biological reproduction, for instance. Divine paternity means that God the Father alone begets a Son who is all that the Father is (the perfect image of the Father), without interval (there is no separation between them), without confusion (the Son never becomes a father, and the Father is not the Son), and without multiplication (the persons of the trinity are one non-numerically-multipliable God). These statements refract language into new registers of meaning in which the term "father" goes awry from its ordinary usage. Indeed, the meaning of the term "Father" for God is non-luminous to those who use it, since only the Father and the Son know what it means to say that one begets the other.¹² In order to avoid the dangers of idolatry and projection, trinitarian theologians commonly emphasize that God is Father neither in a literal nor in a generic sense, but only in relation to the Son. But learning that "Father" in

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 84.

¹² Gregory of Nazianzus, "The Theological Orations," in Edward R. Hardy (ed), *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006 [1954]), 164–165.

God means only “the Father of the Son” still implies that using father rightly means remembering that God is not *a* father, but a father of a different sort than any and all others.¹³ So although the believer may not know just what it means to call God father, the believer must learn what it does *not* mean to call God father—as Nazianzen says, “The Father is the begetter and the emitter; *without* passion, of course, and *without* reference to time, and *not* in a corporeal manner.”¹⁴ The fundamental relation between divine and human fatherhood is thus one of dissimilarity. Yet a very common strategy that theologians employ as a marker of that dissimilarity turns out to generate similarity, and indeed a form of identity, where none such ought to be.

Appeals to the transcendent and analogy-bursting character of God’s fatherhood have become an increasingly common defensive strategy among theologians who wish feminist criticism to touch only the edges of the deposit of faith. As Hans Urs von Balthasar phrases it, Jesus “calls [him] ‘Father’ in a sense that bursts all analogies.”¹⁵ Or in William Placher’s terms, “What it means that Jesus has a divine Father, and that we are allowed to call this one our ‘Father,’ transcends every human case of fatherhood.”¹⁶ Thomas Torrance likewise insists that

the concepts of fatherhood and sonship do not derive from any analogy or inherent likeness between the creature and the Creator. They are laid hold of by divine revelation and are made to point back away altogether from their creaturely and human use to their creative source in the transcendent nature of God, who is eternally Father in himself. . . . Since man is created after the image of God, all fatherly relations within humanity derive from and point to the unique, aboriginal, and transcendent Fatherhood of God. Accordingly, human fatherhood may not be used as a standard by which to judge divine Fatherhood, for there is strictly no comparison between human fatherhood and divine Fatherhood. . . . On the contrary, it is according to the uncreated Fatherhood of God that all creaturely fatherhood is to be understood.¹⁷

¹³ Even to set the comparison up in this way implies just what the comparison intends to deny—and what my argument in the rest of this article will challenge—namely that the relevant point of comparison for divine fatherhood is “other” fathers.

¹⁴ Nazianzus, “Theological Orations,” 161, emphasis added.

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, volume III, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, Graham Harrison (trans) (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1992), 518. Balthasar connects the analogy-bursting character of divine fatherhood to the Father’s generous begetting of the Son out of his womb. Balthasar, like Jürgen Moltmann, is a good example of how those who are considered only marginally orthodox are often the best routes into a diagnostic mapping of an imaginary, for marginal orthodoxy indicates a repetition with a terrifying difference—surfacing what orthodoxy most fears is the truth about its own narratives.

¹⁶ William Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 80.

¹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, “The Christian Apprehension of God the Father,” in Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (ed), *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Torrance's argument twists agonizingly as he insists that no comparison can be made between human and divine fatherhood, except that the former derives from the latter and so ought to be judged by it. He stretches to protect the downward derivation of paternity without introducing a corresponding upward signification: although there is nothing about creaturely fatherhood in general that makes it an appropriate revelatory vessel for the divine, the concept of fatherhood may by the grace of God become an image of the divine. But this statement is juxtaposed with the claim that there is no "analogy or inherent likeness" grounding the relation between divine and human fathers although the latter image the former and point to it as their ground, origin, and transcendent goal. The concepts of fatherhood and sonship cannot meaningfully point "away altogether" from the creaturely usages to which they are adapted by their divine origin, especially as *concepts*. Torrance continues, "we must think of the Fatherhood of God and the relation of human fatherhood to it in an altogether *spiritual* and *imageless* way, and thus without ever reading back descriptively into God the creaturely content or finite imagery of human fatherhood."¹⁸ It is difficult to think of the fatherhood of God in an imageless way if all creaturely fatherhood is its image. But Torrance's primary fear is that human fatherhood might "judge" the divine kind or be projected into it; he seems to take for granted that human fatherhood actively images the divine. Perhaps Torrance's difficulties follow from the two irreconcilable New Testament texts he juxtaposes, Matt. 23:9 and Eph. 3:15.¹⁹ The first enjoins the reservation of the title "father" only to God, while the second extends the name "Father" downward from God onto "every fatherhood in heaven and on earth." Torrance interprets this to mean that only God is properly father, while all other fathers are so only in a derivative sense. Yet if the divine signification of fatherhood brought with it other fathers or their attributes, it would be idolatrous rather than proper, as Torrance's rejection of analogy or likeness implies.²⁰ The signification of divine fatherhood thus depends on a successful distinction between it and the human kind.

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 129–130. Torrance uses a passage from Karl Barth to support this point: "we do not call God Father because we know what that is; on the contrary, because we know God's Fatherhood we afterwards understand what human fatherhood truly is"; Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed according to Calvin's Catechism*, Gabriel Vahanian (trans) (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 14, quoted in Torrance, "Christian Apprehension," 130. See also 137, where Torrance again insists that "God alone is truly and ultimately Father—all other fatherhood is a reflection of his."

¹⁸ Torrance, "Christian Apprehension," 130, emphasis in original. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 70–72.

¹⁹ Torrance, "Christian Apprehension," 131.

²⁰ Robert Jenson comments that "ideological opposition to use of 'Father' and 'Son' and so to the triune name has even led to the manifestly bogus claim that the triune name cannot be a 'proper' name just because it has descriptive meaning and so can be translated"; *Systematic Theology* vol. 1: *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45, footnote 28. Jenson

In another influential example of this strategy, Jürgen Moltmann distinguishes between patriarchal (or “monotheistic”) and trinitarian concepts of fatherhood in God. The first type, “God the Father—the father of the church—the father of his country—the father of the family,” establishes a chain of fathers who stand in analogous relationships to each other. Each father gains power from and in relation to the others, while supporting the others in turn. The second, trinitarian type focuses on the loving relationship between God the Father and God the Son, so that the Father’s “fatherhood is defined by the relationship to this Son.” A rather arduous process of training is required to disconnect one from the other, however: “anyone who wants to understand the trinitarian God must forget the ideas behind this patriarchal Father religion—the super-ego, the father of the family, the father of his country, even the ‘fatherly providence’.” He must gaze solely at the life and message of his brother Jesus: for in fellowship with the only begotten Son he will recognize that the Father of Jesus Christ is his Father too.”²¹ The Father who is discovered in that gaze is “a father who both begets and bears his son” and so becomes “a motherly father too.”²² Moltmann claims that “the doctrine of the Trinity” in this moment “makes a first approach towards overcoming sexist language in the concept of God.”²³ Allowing God the Father, who is properly father in the trinity and adoptively father in relation to all other human beings, to transcend his patriarchal limitations by including even maternity within his all-encompassing grasp neither destabilizes divine patriarchy nor serves as an overcoming of sexism. After all, divine males get to be father, son, and mother, thus demonstrating that symbolic divine masculinity includes even maternity in its transcendent perfection. Non-divine females get to be—at best—included in the indeterminate and androgynous spirit and as symbolic adjuncts to the Father’s ecstatic maternal self-realization. Ultimately, then, Moltmann’s training cannot succeed, for it requires a constant reminder—a bind on the self—that *this* use of fatherhood is different from all other forms of the same. This disconnection establishes an irreducible relation between the different kinds of fatherhood as the self directs its attention to one of the forms and reminds itself that *that* one has nothing to do with *this* one. The self must continually submit itself to examination to ensure that it is looking only toward the right forms of fatherhood and disavowing the wrong ones. Such a repudiation effectively generates its own

is correct to identify such a claim as mistaken. The issue is not whether “Father” has descriptive meaning in addition to being a proper name (or “a term of address within a narrative construction that displays a relation internal to the logic of the construction,” in Jenson’s words). The challenge is whether and how such descriptive meanings are read into the name in ways that either result in the projection of creaturely characteristics into God or that tie God the Father to creaturely fathers in other ways.

²¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, Margaret Kohl (trans) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993 [1981]), 163.

²² *Ibid.*, 164.

²³ *Ibid.*, 165.

transgression by cementing a constitutive relation between these purportedly different paternal deployments: remember to forget the patriarchal father, as it were! The result is precisely the opposite of what Moltmann says he intends. Other linguistic usages are able to distinguish the different meanings of the “same” term without just such arduous labor because the meanings and contextual deployments of the terms are transparently differentiable without the question of a positive relation (and thus the need to generate a distinction) between them arising in the first place. But in this case, the activity of the believer in gazing *only* in the right (and not the wrong) direction suggests just how closely divine fatherhood and human patriarchy are tied together. Indeed, the specific term “father” has shown itself as a potent inflammation to Christian practices of gendered hierarchies, especially in combination with the theological significance often given to the maleness of Christ and his disciples. So the disconnection Moltmann requires is from Christianity’s own history, and that history is the trinity’s history too.

Wolfhart Pannenberg admits that the use of “father”-language for God derives from patriarchal social organization.²⁴ Yet “[t]o bring sexual differentiation into the understanding of God would mean polytheism,” so the God of Israel has “no female partner” (although Pannenberg neglects the significance of Israel’s symbolic femininity to this point).²⁵ Interestingly, Pannenberg reads the *social* role of the father as more theologically decisive than its gendered or biological aspects. Christ’s revelation of God the Father transforms the meaning of divine fatherhood into something like “the duty of a family head to care for the members.” Of course, the father is no longer the “head of the family” in many contexts, which might seem to invalidate the analogy. But for Pannenberg, such shifting relations do “not justify the demand for a revision of the concept of God as Father” because such revision would imply that theology is no more than projection. Instead, Pannenberg identifies election and covenant as the substantial and material forms that divine fatherhood takes.

These features can then be taken up into an understanding of God which confronts the changing concept of human fatherhood as a *norm*. In comparison with it all human fatherhood also pales. For this reason it still retains its power even at a time when patriarchal forms decay and the role of the father within the family loses its distinctive contours. Then the fatherhood of God can truly become the epitome of God’s comprehensive care—the type of care which human fatherhood can *no longer* offer.²⁶

²⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, Geoffrey W. Bromiley (trans) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 260.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 261. As Pannenberg says, “A mark of Israel’s faith from the very outset is that the God who elected the patriarchs, the God of the exodus and Sinai, has no female partner.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 262, latter emphasis mine. Walter Kasper makes an almost identical claim: “the covenantal idea of God as Father can be turned in a prophetic and critical way against the

Divine paternal care confronts failing human paternity (partial, decentered, and substitutable as the latter is) with its own comprehensiveness, its own exemplary nature, and its own unsubstitutability. Pannenberg, tellingly, construes this as a defense against, rather than a validation of, feminist criticisms of the patriarchal nature of the father-god. He continues,

For all his subjection to the Father, Jesus undoubtedly claimed that God is to be understood only as the heavenly Father whom he declared him to be. . . . Jesus is the Son inasmuch as it is in his message of the nearness of the royal rule of the Father, his subjection to the Father's will, and especially the function of his sending as a revelation of the love of God, that this God may be known as Father.²⁷

Amazingly, the *subjection* of the Son to the Father reveals the non-patriarchal nature of divine fatherhood. For Pannenberg, the Son's citational practice (obedient submission via invocation or repetition of the law of the Father as the only God) activates and secures his divinity. Jesus' constant insistence that his Other is the lawgiver to whom he submits enacts the truth of the Father's delegation of his authority to the Son.²⁸ This is the mode of Jesus' sonship, revealing the deeper reason, beyond extrapolation from the assumption of Jesus' maleness, why he is *son* in the theological imaginary. As the one who becomes the eternal locus of the Father's monarchy in this submission, the Son's subjection is a form of kenotic participation in the power of paternity, the form of fatherhood that remains bound to its human instantiation through determinate negation.

In her influential essay, "Can a Feminist Call God 'Father'?" Janet Martin Soskice picks up Moltmann's attempt to identify the Father only through the Son's revelation of him, rather than via any general concept of fatherhood.²⁹ But in the lightly revised version of the essay that appears in her recent book

concrete fathers of this world. In all truth the dignity of father belongs to God alone. It is not any earthly father but God, from whom all fatherhood is derived (Eph. 3.15), who defines what true fatherhood is. . . . God's fatherhood, being the source, is also the norm of paternal authority and the critical standard by which it is judged"; Matthew J. O'Connell (trans), *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 139–140. Kasper claims that sexism is excluded nonetheless since "the Old Testament can also translate the Father's loving mercy into the language of womanliness and motherhood," 140.

²⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 264.

²⁸ Pannenberg argues that it belongs to the concept of God that God must be lord of any actually existing world. The materialization and establishment of God's lordship in the world is the task of the Son and Spirit; this extension outward of the inner-trinitarian monarchy is the link between economic and immanent trinity. For a more extensive discussion of these issues, see my "The ultimate consequence of his self-distinction from the Father . . .': Difference and Hierarchy in Pannenberg's Trinity", *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 51 (2009), 383–399.

²⁹ Janet Martin Soskice, "Can a Feminist Call God 'Father'?" in Teresa Elwes (ed), *Women's Voices: Essays in Contemporary Feminist Theology* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992), 15–29. Also printed in Kimel, *Speaking the Christian God*, 81–94.

The Kindness of God, Soskice, in an astonishingly revealing move, begins her discussion with the human rather than divine version of the same:

Fathers, of any sort, get only bad press these days. Fathers—as fathers—seem only to appear in the press if associated with criminal violence of a sexual, physical, or psychological sort (usually all three) towards partners, wives, or children. Or else they appear as absent. Single parent families are overwhelmingly headed by women, while “fathers” cannot, or will not, be found. Yet in the biblical writings, naming God “Father” is an anticipation of great intimacy, new relation, of hope, and of love.³⁰

Although her discussion aims to distinguish and even separate divine paternity from the human kind, it starts *from* human paternity. And not just from human paternity in general, but from the “absence” of fathers in single-parent families, and from the “bad press” that *all* fathers get these days. The evidence for such bad press is lacking—Soskice simply leaves the assertion hanging. Her contrast between the desirability and uniqueness of theological paternity with the failures—real and representational—of human paternity serves to cement an already-existing relation between them rather than disconnecting one from the other. Soskice is concerned, however, to block the undesirable consequences of an unchastened divine paternity: “what is objectionable is . . . that the ‘divine male’ is styled as one who is powerful, dominant, and implacable.”³¹ Here Soskice mistakenly identifies the almighty and overbearing aspects of divine paternity as the problem with it. She assumes that a gentle, kind, and consent-seeking divine father would be less susceptible to idolatry, and less susceptible to deployment in the establishment of gendered human hierarchies, but there is no reason to believe that, nor is any argument offered. Indeed, the trope of the benevolent patriarch or head of the family lies at least as deep in our cultural registers as does that of the “implacable” male, as Pannenberg’s discussion shows.³² Soskice develops her benevolent father in relation to another programmatic essay, Paul Ricoeur’s “Fatherhood: From Phantasm to Symbol,”³³ in which he argues that representations of fatherhood develop and change

³⁰ Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

³² Soskice assumes that there is such a thing as “the feminist objection” (*ibid.*, 72, emphasis added) to father-language for God, which may be why she holds that the particular form of divine masculinity is the problem. She connects the objection to Sallie McFague’s rejection of omnipotence and otherness in descriptions of God. But there is no intrinsic connection between being concerned about father-language for God and rejecting divine omnipotence. It is perfectly possible to hold on to classical understandings of divine omnipotence yet to have concerns about the function of father-language for God.

³³ Paul Ricoeur, “Fatherhood: From Phantasm to Symbol,” in Don Ihde (ed), *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 468–497.

in the biblical materials, moving toward an ever-greater intimacy grounded in the Son's knowledge of the Father. As Soskice summarizes part of his argument, "The God of Israel is defined, then, over and against father gods, gods who beget the world, and paradoxically, it is this abolition of the biological father God that makes non-idolatrous, metaphorical 'father language' about God possible."³⁴ Human fatherhood is qualified as the thing that divine fatherhood *must not* be. When Soskice claims that an "incomplete [Father-]figure . . . traverses a number of semantic levels"³⁵ in order to escape its patriarchal determination, she returns to the arguments developed by Moltmann above regarding the motherly Father and the priority of the Son's revelation of the Father.³⁶ And so we have come full circle.

These wonderfully non-patriarchal father-figments of the theological imagination slide back and forth between divine and human fatherhood. Their relations to each other can be measured in units derived from the slippage between the phallus and the penis. One is established by a specific repudiation of the other, ensuring that they are not only bound together, but the divine achieves what the human should have been, but never can be. The asserted transcendence of human fatherhood is vitiated in that move. Divine paternity is not like human paternity—it is not fragmented and vulnerable to failure, nor is it in need of intercourse (and therefore an unreliable erection) or a sexually differentiated other. What divine paternity is *not* like is human paternity specifically, not, say, human relations of care more generally. Yet in these theologies, divine paternity is the origin of all paternity and all relationality in its generation of the Son, and its perfection further serves to critique the failure of human paternity, the all-embracing care that cannot be offered by a merely human father. So human paternity remains a reflection of

³⁴ Soskice, *Kindness*, 76.

³⁵ Soskice does not insist that God ought *only* to be addressed as Father. She follows Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite in admitting that divine father-language may carry dangerous associations for women who have been abused by their fathers (Soskice, *Kindness*, 81–82). I would suggest, however, that divine father-language is not merely risky due to the abusive behavior of some human fathers, but because when used in the ways examined here, it establishes fatherhood as a particular reflection of God and, conversely, God as a particularly excellent kind of father by which other fathers should be measured.

³⁶ When Soskice tells her trinitarian story briefly in the following chapter (Soskice, *Kindness*, 116), she argues, following Jean-Luc Marion, that God the Father "in some sense" also dies on the cross with the Son, then "is born"—or better 'becomes father'—with the Son and in the Spirit. This is a vision of a Trinity of complete mutuality" (ibid., 117). It is difficult to sort out the metaphysics of such a claim, especially since Soskice retains a classical account of the processions without quite explaining the different levels of predication with which she operates. An economy in which the Father too dies, and which reads the cross as the "separation of God from God" (emphasis added) offers little promise for life and hope and obscures the copresence of the trinitarian persons with each other in the economy of salvation. Immanently, she suggests, this "is a story of the perichoretic outpouring of love and birth between the three who *are* only in relation one to another. All three persons, figuratively, give birth"—the Father to the Son, the Son to the church, and the Spirit who "animates the Church in the world" (ibid., 119). Yet it is only the Father who begets the Son, while the Spirit gives birth only to that which is non-divine.

its divine archetype and participates in its imagistic power. The use to which these theologians put divine fatherhood establishes, rather than negates, a positive relation between divine and human fatherhood. And this happens just at the point at which that relation is denied. Indeed, this identification is the result of the specific strategies used as defensive measures *against* the suspicion that God the Father may have anything to do with fatherhood more generally.

But let us examine the structure of the trinitarian imaginary yet more carefully. The discussion hitherto has focused on the specific quilting point of the relation between divine and human fatherhood. If these theologians insist, as indeed they do, that it is only in relation to the Son that the Father is known as Father, and that the fatherhood revealed in that relation looks quite different than any other kind of fatherhood (although the latter might nonetheless be the point of comparison and distinction for the former), then we must test such claims as well. The imaginary expressed in the trinitarian register must, these theologians suggest, retain no patriarchal forms of fatherhood derived from the cultural imaginary of masculinity. That would be to look at other fathers only to project their attributes into God. Perhaps inner-trinitarian fatherhood might yet surprise us with its difference—whether in practice or in representation—from ordinary human fatherhood. Perhaps *this* examination will at last show us the Father-God who is neither male nor patriarchal as we approach him from his relation to the Son and Spirit.

Arguably, the most significant difference between “Eastern” and “Western” trinitarianisms is the issue of the *filioque* clause, which in the West stabilizes the distinction between the Son and Spirit by introducing an oppositional relation between them. In the East, the distinction is guaranteed by *the name*, the law of the Father, who *begets* one and *brings forth* the other. The distinction between the Son and the Spirit is found not in their relation one to the other, which is subsequent in a non-temporal sense to their originary relations to the Father, but in the monarchical act of “production” or causation.³⁷ It is not irrelevant that the East accepts the terminology of “cause” that the West rejects. The former accepts the subordinationist consequences of this picture, indeed celebrates them, as a manifestation of the all-encompassing monarchy of the Father, whose person alone is self-grounding freedom in ecstatic mode.³⁸ The latter, worried about subordination and ontological distinction, subjects the Father also *to* the law of trinitarian differentiation by the

³⁷ See Vladimir Lossky, *In The Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 82; John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 40; Gregory of Nyssa, “An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods,” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 266–267; contrast Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* part I, QQ. 27–49, *Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (trans), second edition (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1921), Ia, Q. 27.1, pp. 3–6 and especially Q. 33.1, pp. 72–73.

³⁸ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 44–46, esp. footnote 40.

addition of the words “and [through] the Son” to secure the difference of the Spirit from the Son. In the West, then, the monarchy of the Father is insufficient by itself to guarantee the distinction between the Son and Spirit. Monarchy and productive power are finally non-identical and to an extent transferable (heritable), for only the productive power of the Father, not his monarchy, is transferred to the Son as the latter participates in breathing out the Spirit, and only the Son receives the name of the Father. This law of the Son sets him up as a second origin within the trinity. He becomes another “father” whose fatherhood is simultaneously secured and cancelled out through the name “Son,” which derives from and extends the name “Father.” Reproduction of the name in derived mode, or what we might term the trinitarian structure of kinship, functions to safeguard relation and inheritance. The Spirit is the hidden location of these exchanges of inheritance, monarchy, and the name. Thus the femininity of the Spirit has proven itself the irresistible condition of trinitarian exogamy as the second difference or as the bond of the mutual love of Father and Son.³⁹ The Spirit’s escape from paternal over-determination is also its subjection and its forgetting.

The trinitarian system of differentiation and distinction works through the appearance of the Father’s generative power, which expresses itself in the Word of difference: the Son, who is the perfect image of the Father and the guarantor of his fecundity. The Son is the Word according to whom all of reality is structured and brought into being as an ordered unity; the Son is also the Father’s phallus as the symbol and sign of the Father’s plenitude. The phallus, symbolically speaking, is the sign of meaning’s stabilization and so of the possibility of plenitudinous self-identity.⁴⁰ The Father is only himself in the generation of the Son,⁴¹ so the generation of the Son stabilizes and secures the Father’s ecstatic self-identity as Father. Moreover, the perfection of the Son’s imaging of the Father means that the difference of the Son is only a difference of origin, yet a difference that shows itself as obedience and gratitude.⁴² The Son is also the Father’s seed, not just as the *logos spermatikos*

³⁹ Several patristic references to the feminine Spirit can be found in Joel C. Elowsky (ed), *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, in *Ancient Christian Doctrine 4* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 18. Leonardo Boff refers approvingly to the “feminine dimension” of the Spirit in Phillip Berryman (trans), *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 92–93, although he adds the usual caveats about God being beyond gender. The appeal to the Spirit’s femininity is common enough that Mary Daly’s mimicking of such appeals has not yet been surpassed: “You’re included under the Holy Spirit. He’s feminine!”; *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990 [1978]), 38.

⁴⁰ In the trinity, sign and signified coincide in the relation between the Father and his Word.

⁴¹ “For without the Son the Father has neither existence nor name, any more than the Powerful without Power, or the Wise without Wisdom.” Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, in Philip Schaff and Rev. Henry Wallace (eds), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, Second Series (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), book II, section 3, 105.

⁴² “In fact, the Son’s absolute obedience ‘even unto death, the death of the Cross’ is intrinsically oriented to the Father (otherwise it would be meaningless, and not in any case an absolute

but also as the seed that in its death fructifies the womb of Mary-church.⁴³ The Father's power of self-sharing shows his humility (in his willingness to share himself with another) and just so his supreme, absolute power (for a father who can share himself and all his power fully with another, without being threatened by that other, is greater than a father who cannot⁴⁴). And the fullness of trinitarian distinctiveness shows itself as Father and Son breathe out an Other who is the sign and seal of the perfection—the virginal purity—of their mutual love.⁴⁵

The Holy Spirit serves as the site for the preservation of the self-identity of Father and Son by protecting their focus on each other while purportedly freeing them from the charge of narcissism or self-enclosure (trinitarian theologians like to emphasize that love must always have a third⁴⁶). The Spirit's ambiguous escape has a positive and a negative aspect: positively, as the name which points to the divine being (for God is spirit),⁴⁷ and negatively, as the specular other of Father and Son in which they gaze at one another, an infinite mirroring traceable back to the Father's self-imaging in his Other. If the Holy Spirit secures the relation between Father and Son, the Spirit's disappearance, its absence from the scene of figuration, is made evident. Or perhaps the Spirit is the sign and seal of the fecundity of the Father-Son relationship. Then the Father's paternal virility is secured through the generation of the Son, which leaves his womb empty⁴⁸ because his *all* (except fatherhood) is given in the begetting (not making) of this Son. The Father's womb renders him auto-erotically penetrable without fragmenting him, for his "emptiness" is only symbolic as his Word speaks of love in the breathing out of the Spirit, showing that he comes over and over again in an endless and

divine obedience"); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, Aidan Nichols, OP (trans) (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 208.

⁴³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, volume IV: *The Action*, Graham Harrison (trans) (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), 351–361, especially 361: "the Word is empowered to make his whole body into God's seed; thus the Word finally and definitively becomes flesh in the Virgin Mother, Mary-Ecclesia."

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Richard of St. Victor, *The Trinity*, in Grover A. Zinn (trans) *Richard of St. Victor: The Twelve Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark, Book Three of the Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), book 3, chapter IV, 376–77.

⁴⁵ As, again, Richard of St. Victor suggests (*ibid.*, book 3, chapter XV, 388–89); see also Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, John Gibb (trans) in Philip Schaff (ed) *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. VII (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991 [reprint]), tractate 99, sections 4–9, 382–84 and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, volume V: *The Last Act*, Graham Harrison (trans) (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1998), 245.

⁴⁶ Richard of St Victor, *The Trinity*, book 3, chapter XIV, 387–88.

⁴⁷ See Augustine, *The Trinity*, Edmund Hill, OP (trans) (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), book 5, chapter 3, section 12, 197.

⁴⁸ The motif of the Father's womb, as formulated by the Council of Toledo in 675 CE, has been picked up by theologians like Balthasar, Moltmann (*The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 165), and Leonardo Boff (*Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 72) as a way to conceptualize non-patriarchal divine paternity. Balthasar emphasizes the emptiness of the Father's womb in *Theo-drama* vol. III, 518.

excessive procession of ecstatic love.⁴⁹ He is no human male whose capacity is exhausted in one final climax.

The Spirit, the Father's climactic emissary, hovers over the unformed waters, then shapes the transformation of the Son into the Father's seed, a seed which when cast into the ground makes the order of the world. But if reproduction belongs only to the Father within the trinity, the seed-Son cannot reproduce, and instead suffers castration (or the threat of castration) in order to become the "supra"-feminine space of the Father's self-enactment,⁵⁰ for the Son can do only what he sees the Father doing (John 5:19). If the Son participates in the procession of the Spirit, Father and Son together breathe out a sigh of union which turns tail and enfolds them both. The Son has then been given, not fatherhood, but potency—the ability to reproduce, or just to produce—in so transcendent a fashion that he does not even need to become father, for the law of the Father has been subjected to the law of the Son, who is begotten yet breathes and makes with no hint of his own sexuality. Perhaps the Spirit appears as the only true "man" (generic) in *this* image, for it is the Spirit alone who escapes sexual difference "in the name", and the Spirit who is not tied to anyone's apron strings as its indeterminacy frees it from full bondage in its originary site as the term of divine dependence.

In the missions, or their lived practice, these "utterly subjected" subjects "have no choice but to reiterate the law of their genesis."⁵¹ That law is fulfilled economically when the Son hands the kingdom back to the Father so that God will be all in all (1. Cor. 15:28).⁵² The distinctions among trinitarian persons are naturalized through the law of the Father. He is the originary origin, the one in whom all moments of difference find their beginning in his supreme, ultimate act of begetting, in which he shows the power of the divine nature by doing with it what he will, as Balthasar suggests.⁵³ This power of relational

⁴⁹ "Thus the Father causes the Son to be, to 'go'; but this also means that the Father 'lets go' of him, lets him go free. So too, in the act of begetting, a man causes his seed to go on its way while he himself retires into the background"; Balthasar, *Theo-drama* vol. V, 86. Marcella Althaus-Reid's apposite assessment of divine femininity may serve as a second epigraph for this argument: "What may worry us theologically is not necessarily what real phalluses may do, but the symbolic ones. What alarms us is not what role real clitorises fulfill, but the imaginary clitoris's function in the dialectics of membranous theologies (hymens) and life. . . . It may well be that God has a female sexuality without a clitoris, but with a hymen and a vagina for penetrative reproductive purposes, and this can then make the femininity of God irrelevant for women"; *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 73.

⁵⁰ Balthasar, *Theo-drama* vol. V, 91.

⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), 135.

⁵² See also Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 312–13 and Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 91–2. Contrast Augustine, however, who emphasizes that Christ retains the kingdom as he hands it over to the Father, and that the Son has subjected all things to himself as well; *The Trinity*, book 1, chapter 3, sections 15–16, 75–6.

⁵³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, volume II: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, Graham Harrison (trans) (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 256. Cf.

self-disposal, identical with the Father's own being, generates a system of gift exchange within the trinity where the Son's reception of his being in gratitude turns into the enactment of submission and obedience.⁵⁴ The Spirit naturally and freely performs the distance and intimacy between the Father and the Son. Divine differentiation takes place through the eternal relations of origin in which God incessantly pours forth the fullness of differentiation into a tripartite movement of distinction in which the seeming destabilization of the natural relation between Father and Son through the Spirit (and in terms of divine gender) serves in truth to enact precisely the priority of that naturalized relationship. That is, the priority of the fatherhood of God, apparently displaced by the relation between him and his Son as it issues in the breathing out of their spiritual "child," is what is posited rather than destabilized by the seeming subversion of the system through the rejection of divine gender. Thus it is no wonder that the role of the Spirit in the economic life of the Son is to mediate to him "in the form of a rule" the will he once shared with the Father but to which he now must submit for a time as the temporal expression of his eucharistic gratitude to the Father. But the Son reasserts his own priority over the Spirit in the end.⁵⁵

When the Son comes along, trapped in flesh thanks to the Spirit's whispering insinuation, the Spirit makes visible what no one else can see: hovering as a dove, this transcendent non-creature marks Jesus, while a voice speaks from heaven—"this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"⁵⁶—showing that the lines of patriarchal inheritance remain intact, and that while the Father may have begotten a Word, he can still chatter. Yet the Spirit offers more. As the Son proceeds along his straight road to the cross, where does the Spirit go? At minimum, wherever he will: Jonathan Edwards says that the Spirit is "the principle that as it were reigns over the Godhead and governs his heart and wholly influences both the Father and the Son in all that they do."⁵⁷ The Spirit switches between sending and being sent, between topping and whispering, declaring and seducing. The Spirit comes at Pentecost in an unregulated outpouring that shocks the surrounding community, and intoxicates the disciples just enough that they declare their allegiance to the Son publicly. This happens just at the moment when the

also John Zizioulas's emphasis on the freedom with which the Father causes the Son and Spirit to exist. God "is Trinity not because the divine *nature* is ecstatic but because the Father as a *person* freely wills this communion"; *Being as Communion*, 44, emphasis in original; see also 41, 43 and *passim*.

⁵⁴ "In begetting the Son, the Father, as it were, addresses a request to him, and the Son in turn wishes nothing other than to employ his entire filial freedom in fulfilling the Father's will"; Balthasar, *Theo-drama* vol. V, 88.

⁵⁵ This is how Balthasar understands what he terms the "trinitarian inversion" in *Theo-drama* vol. III, 187–88.

⁵⁶ Matt. 3:17.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Discourse on the Trinity," *Works* volume 21, p. 147, quoted in Placher, *Triune God*, 100.

Son seems to be gone for good, not only because he has poured himself out on the cross but because even his ah!-so-penetrable post-resurrection body has gone away in its ascension to a higher heaven in which it sits at the right hand of the Father. Transformed into bread and wine, the disciples are now “biting and chomping”⁵⁸ on Jesus and, given courage and speech by the Spirit, they are able to speak of these things openly, without secrecy: coming out. And in their proclamation, propagated through faithful non-sexual reproduction over the centuries, they come to approach asymptotically the perfection of the Son’s relation to the Father under the sign of the Spirit, adopted as “sons” identified by the perfection of their adherence to the form of the Father’s originary power (speaking “begotten, not made”).⁵⁹

The Spirit, like the Son, leaves home. But while the Son finds himself utterly subjected—to the Father, to his desire for the world—the Spirit eventually gets to have all the fun. No one can predict (or predicate?) it. Sometimes it whispers—but did it not also storm and light fires? Those who are marked by the Spirit fall into an unregulated frenzy and behave in strange and unpredictable ways: “The Spirit’s workings lie beyond control or prediction, but their effects are visible enough. They seize people, transforming them, making leaders of outsiders and reducing kings to comatose nakedness.”⁶⁰ The enlivening Spirit-dove gets tossed out from the Father’s hand and enters into the womb—the only member of the trinity who brushes against a woman? Or a form of artificial insemination, suggesting that on the human level, the Father is not as potent as he is divinely. Speaking from the Spirit’s place denies the priority of inheritance and masculine generativity. Fire licking, hovering above disciples enlivened and transformed, speaking the word anew.

Starting from the Spirit

The recognition of Christianity’s constitution as a logic of multiplicity rather than oneness in trinitarian doctrine is often a way to use an especially powerful or “orthodox” imagistic register to approach ends known to be desirable in advance of a detailed engagement with the material of trinitarian reflection, in structurally similar fashion to the delight with which other theologians “discover” that obedience and hierarchy need not entail inequality through examination of the relation between the Father and the Son. Both kinds of claims depend on successful depatriarchalization of the Father-God. But under the regime of sexuality’s production of identity through insistence

⁵⁸ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 310–11.

⁵⁹ See Virginia Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁶⁰ William Placher, *Triune God*, 88. Similarly, “from the start, then, the Spirit can be helpful and life-giving but also unpredictable, uncontrollable, potentially terrifying” (86).

on sexual difference's constitutive status, we have reason to be suspicious both of the likelihood that a divine father *could be* so restricted and restrained, and of insistence that he *has been*—especially if the technical stipulations of trinitarian theology are either covered over or simply replaced (as is notoriously the case with Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier) without engagement with the theo-logics that generate such stipulations to begin with.

The problem is not ultimately that God is understood as father rather than, say, mother, or in the linguistic gendering of the divine; the problem lies more fundamentally in two alternative forms of telling and selling trinitarian histories. The first pretends that relating God the Father rightly to human fathers (through analogy and transcendence) and to the Son (through unsubstitutability and directing one's vision only to the Father of the Son) generates a Father unconnected to Christian patriarchies. Christianity's patriarchal history—which is not its only history!—is apparently made to disappear only to become more powerful through continued or even heightened insistence on the perfection and uniqueness of divine paternity in relation to contemporary forms of social organization.⁶¹ The second takes the positive potential of the trinity as a resource for envisioning and valuing difference and multiplicity without engaging the trinity's particular and concrete histories of development and reflection, practicing renaming without undoing. The idol-skewering potential of skewed theological language is blunted (if not dropped altogether) in such moves.

Insofar as it is taken to be the “second difference,” the Spirit cannot and will never hold open the relation between the Father and the Son in the way that some current projects require it to do. Considering the Spirit as the second difference or the Father as the first and the Son as the second person of the trinity, even if such construals are followed or accompanied by denial that number and its gendered correlate strictly speaking applies to the trinity, renders the Spirit a place, a site, for the becoming of the positive personalities of Father and Son and denies the immediacy and inseparability the trinitarian persons have in relation to each other. The more promising implication of the Spirit's positionality is that in its wildness and unpredictability, its priority in Christian experience, and perhaps most significantly, in that the Spirit has almost never been accused of begetting or generating another divine person, the Spirit's personhood can delineate a model for the theological transformations that Father and Son require. In this way, they too may undergo a successful operation of “re-skewing” so as to generate a more adequate trinitarian theology. But the Spirit cannot do this work alone. Reading the

⁶¹ Note that when Aquinas justifies father-language for the Principle of the trinity, he does so in part because paternity is the “complement of generation,” not due to any sort of analogy with (patriarchal or non-patriarchal) human fatherhood as a social practice. His justification may therefore not hold when it no longer becomes possible to see paternity in that way; *Summa Theologica* Ia, 33.2, ad. 2, 75.

trinity askew requires taking the terms of the revealed or creedal trinity with utmost seriousness, so seriously that the performance reveals the truth of the constitutive exclusions and failures of the trinitarian imaginary while enacting other possibilities of reading the history from which all trinitarian theology springs, the enactment of God-with-us and God-for-the-world in the life of Jesus and in the invisible, indeterminate, and potentially free presence of the Holy Spirit.

Reskewing trinitarian language, starting from the Spirit, has the potential to deregulate the Father and the Son from their subjected paternal-filial focus on each other. Setting the trinitarian imaginary free from its dogmatic and material connection to the fascination of Christian thought with the singularity of origin and origin's limited heritability opens the future of systematic theology to an unfolding movement beyond the antitheses of paternity, origination, and submission. This requires describing trinitarian distinctions without origin, either as fidelity to the origin of Christian speech of the trinitarian God or yet more significantly as origin-relations between divine persons. To speak "Father" without fatherhood sets the language of fatherhood askew in a yet more thorough-going fashion than the perfection of divine paternity in distinction to the failures and fractures of its human instantiation can achieve. Speaking improperly of the trinity—starting from the Spirit, without origin, and without the overdetermination of the Father and the Son as it is structured by the latter's grateful reception of the "gift" of divine being—reshapes the material of systematic theology without losing its genetic connection to the history of Christian thought. Trinitarian theology without origin requires no first, second, or third, the numeration of trinitarian persons that, despite stipulative denials, continues to reveal hierarchies denying the revelation of God in Christ and Spirit through their subjection, via origin, to the law and will of the Father. But the priority of the Spirit will not do much to transform the theological imaginary unless the Spirit's confrontation with the Father and the Son takes place face to face, without avoiding or eliding their material histories. Said more directly, without engagement with the technicalities of trinitarian theology on their own terms, the trinity will not be displaced as the site of the maintenance of the masculine divine. The Spirit neither begets nor generates. It escapes final signification. Its underdetermination must serve as a model for the other trinitarian persons.⁶² Otherwise their masculinity will remain, even if it is

⁶² This is *not* to say that the trinitarian persons should be rendered generic, nor to say that they need to be made similar to or identical with one another in a way that would threaten their real distinctions. The Spirit's freedom from originating another divine person ought, I am suggesting, to be expanded to the rest of the trinity, but distinction must remain. Relations of origin are not the only way in which divine persons may be distinguished. Epistemically, the economy of salvation requires an immanent distinction between the persons, but it does not demand a particular metaphysics of distinction. The tradition has occasionally flirted with other accounts of distinction (absolute persons or reciprocal constitution, for instance).

made invisible through insistence on the impossibility of divine gender, as long as origin-relations remain the referent of paternity and sonship in God. Reskewing the material registers of trinitarian language requires polyfidelity expressed through dual and simultaneous readings of the trinitarian imaginary in the conventional idiom of systematic theology and in recognition and analysis of the imagistic work done by the linguistic materialities that enliven trinitarian discourse. The different registers of trinitarian relations, sexual difference, and the difference beyond difference that names the God-world relation must be disconnected from each other and allowed their own separate integrities instead of projecting a more beautiful version of fatherhood into God. The motivation for such disconnection is fidelity to the truth of God-with-us in Christ and the Spirit. A polydox theology cannot limit its loves monolatrously.

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