Comment: *God the Great Fugue*

Sometimes it looks as if Catholicism and Protestantism are simply two incompatible forms of Christianity. In her recent book *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), Daphne Hampson, herself neither Catholic nor Lutheran, contends that Catholic and Lutheran forms of sensibility, life and thought issue from incommensurable understandings of how human beings relate to God. Indeed, her contention is, in effect, that no Catholic could even understand what Lutheranism is about except by ceasing to be a Catholic.

Obviously, when Martin Luther understood what Catholicism was about he felt compelled to move out. It is not so clear what a Lutheran, these days, should do. In his splendid two-volume *Systematic Theology* (Oxford University Press 1997-99), just out in paperback, Robert W. Jenson, the doyen of American Lutheran theologians, opens out a number of lines which a Catholic would find congenial.

A good deal, of course, is debatable. Perhaps Jenson's doctrine of the church is on the high side: 'The body that the risen Christ *is* , is the church' (volume 1, page 206): nothing more nor less. Perhaps, rather, it's his conception of the risen body of Christ that is minimalist. He has a high doctrine of the church in another sense: 'It is clear that the unity of the church cannot in fact now be restored except with a universal pastor located at Rome' (volume 2, page 247).

Like Hampson, Jenson attaches great importance to the place within Catholic Christianity of Greek philosophy, or what he instructively spells out as 'the theology of the historically particular Olympian-Parmenidean religion, later shared with the wider Mediterranean cultic world' (1: 10). He is quite as suspicious of this as she is. On the other hand, he reads the history of the doctrine of the Trinity as the 'overcoming' of pagan antiquity's interpretation of being as 'persistence' (1: 159-60).

The concept of 'being' is not biblical, he maintains. We can imagine (just about) a history of Christian doctrine in which the doctrine that God is one remained no more than repeated denial that there is any other god besides the Lord who brought the people out of slavery (Exodus 20:1-2). But, since 'being' was a central concept in the theology with which the Christian faith immediately became entangled, it was an unavoidable determinant of how the Christian doctrine of the oneness of God actually developed (1: 207).

Insisting that 'the concept of being is incurably theological', he cites Plato and Aristotle to the effect that 'being' is 'motionless, impassible, utterly self-satisfied and just so divine'. This is 'what satisfies the mind's longing for absolute assurance, for transcendence over time's surprises'; and much else in this vein.

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It is only now—really only since Karl Barth—that Christian theologians have begun to come to terms with this 'unbaptized God', this ancient Greek concept of the divine being that has never ceased to control Christian theology. What Jenson attempts to carry forward is reinterpretation of the concept of being as described so far, acknowledging its unavoidability 'within the theological enterprise actually in course', so as to be able to say 'what it is for God to be'.

What we need is the doctrine of divine simplicity. Thomas Aquinas, 'the great exemplar and standard of this move', will not take us all the way; but his doctrine of the identity of God 's essence and existence is where we should start—'one of intellectual history's most powerful and tantalizing ideas'—'At least from the one side', Jenson comments dryly, 'also reasonably clear'.

On the clear side the doctrine restates the doctrine of creation. What it is to be created, is to be something that need not have existed: to have a nature which does not guarantee its actual existence.

The less clear side is what it means to say that there is no such real distinction in God—Thomas's 'decisive maxim', as Jenson calls it. He invokes the traditional doctrine that God, as being, truth, and goodness is, adjectivally, God as knowable, lovable and enjoyable. 'God's one being', as knowable, lovable and enjoyable, as Thomas Aquinas works this out in the *Summa Theologiae* (1a. qq3-26), invites us to see God's one being 'in trinitarian openness'.

With a little help from the American Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), and a bit more from Gregory of Nyssa (c.330-c.395), one of the Cappadocian Fathers, we may say, according to Jenson, that the doctrine of the 'one being of God', thus understood, yields a conception of God as an 'event', an 'exchange', a 'conversation', finally as 'a great fugue' (I: 236).

That goes much further than Thomas. For all his interest in the power of music, mostly from reading Boethius and Augustine, as Umberto Eco showed long ago, it did not occur to him to appeal to 'pure' music as an analogy for 'the discourse that is God'.

It fits with Jenson's concern for decent worship. Music, choreography and setting are not 'adventitious': 'A congregation singing a hymn of praise to the Father is doubling the Son's praise, and the surge of rhythm and melody is the surge of the Spirit's glorification of the Father and the Son'. Citing Thomas's maxim 'for a last time', God's essence is God's existence: the one God is 'the sheer perichoresis of Father, Son, and Spirit'—which means, perhaps, beyond the allusion to Thomas Aquinas, that Lutherans and Catholics can appeal to something in which they may be at one: in the doctrine of God as Trinity.

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