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Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*: a review essay[1]

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Abstract

The essay explores the inner logic that connects Jenson's view of the work of Christ, the person of Christ, and the doctrine of God. More specifically, it examines his understanding of the cross, the incarnation, and the trinity. Despite clear intentions to the contrary, Jenson lands outside the bounds of established ecumenical consensus. His view of the cross tends toward Socinus, of the incarnation toward Arius, and of the trinity toward Hegel in ways that seem subordinationist and tritheistic. One possible reason for this outcome is a rationalistic mindset that displays a low tolerance for paradox in dogmatic theology.

Robert W. Jenson gives us the twentieth century's most accomplished systematic theology written in English. It has few peers in any language. It is concise without being trivial, learned but not inaccessible, ecumenical while still rooted in Lutheran confessions, and stunningly fresh and original in its approach to the major topics. No one at any level, whether advanced or neophyte, can fail to learn from this work or remain unchallenged by it. It is the consummate work of a lifetime. Its proper assessment by the ecumenical church will need to be wide-ranging, serious and prolonged. Without attempting to be as encyclopedic, say, as Pannenberg, or as imposing as someone like Barth, Jenson has opted instead to be judicious, an endeavor that succeeds admirably. At his fingertips he has an astonishing fund of citations and quotations from every period of theology's history and every ecumenical tradition. Irenaeus, Cyril, Maximus and Palamas; Cyprian, Augustine and Aquinas; Luther, Melanchthon and Brenz; Jonathan Edwards; Ebeling, Pannenberg and Barth; not to mention lesser figures like Thomasius and Dorner; and many, many more, including the consensus documents of up-to-date ecumenical discussion – all are summoned, it seems, at just the right moment and for just the right effect. Besides being theologically deft, the work is also culturally, scientifically and philosophically sophisticated. Not least, it might as well be mentioned, it contains,

[1] Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 1999), xii + 244 pp. & viii + 380 pp.

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from beginning to end, the most remarkable footnotes of any work I have ever read – often deliciously wicked, sometimes infuriating, always provocative, never trite.

It would be wonderful if one could stop at this point. Unfortunately, however, Jenson is unlikely to persuade many readers about his most basic proposals. In the end, the task for the ecumenical church will be to figure out if the very real idiosyncracies of this work can be retrieved by means of more careful, less reckless restatement. Jenson himself provides some hints, perhaps, on how that task might fruitfully be pursued. That it is worth pursuing is guaranteed by the brilliance of the work. Generally speaking, however, just as all the waters in scripture are the waters of baptism (Northrop Frye), so all the mistakes in Jenson's theology are the same. When they do not confuse what ought to be kept distinct, they separate what ought to be kept as one. More substantively, after a whole career of railing, from one book to the next, against what he regards as an unbaptized God, Jenson finally leaves us with (as it seems to me) – a decidedly unbaptized God.

The core of Jenson's systematic proposals can be traced by moving through three topics: the cross, the incarnation, and the trinity. These are, in any case, topics that always need to be considered together. Where one or another of them is ignored (as is too often the case in contemporary trinitarianism), the results can only be unfortunate. To his credit, Jenson understands this linkage (though he does not always make it explicit). The coherence of his ideas means, however, that the problems manifest at one point invariably reassert themselves at another.

The cross: Jenson's loss of the perfect tense

The revisionary character of Jenson's position about the saving significance of Christ's death is telling (1.179–93). One is tempted to say that to fail here is to fail everywhere. Fortunately, Jenson's work is too rich to be disabled, entirely, by what is decided here. Nevertheless, the failures run very deep. The weight of scripture, tradition and established liturgical practice, to my mind, cannot be so easily brushed aside. Jenson's well-known reference to Jesus' resurrection – incessant throughout all his writings – is not finally so orthodox as it seems, because, as this work makes clear for perhaps the first time, it occurs at the expense of the cross.

It will not do to say, as Jenson does, that the ecumenical church has no single established theory of the atonement (1.186). The ecumenical church has no single established theory of anything. As the councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451) made clear, however, with respect to the trinity and the incarnation, the church does have an authoritative conciliar

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consensus about what *sorts* of views are to be ruled out and what *sorts* are to be ruled in. Although church doctrines of the atonement do not enjoy the same kind of conciliar guidance, the situation is little different in actual practice. A *de facto* consensus arguably exists that no view[2] of the atonement will be acceptable that does not do justice to Christ's work in both its priestly and royal aspects as fulfilled in the cross.

An excellent overview of the ecumenical consensus, with all its internal complexities, can be found in Hans Urs von Balthasar.[3] The priestly work of Christ centers on the *admirabile commercium*, the wondrous exchange. Being both the priest and victim in one, Christ has taken our sin to himself that we might receive his righteousness and life. As authorized by scripture, constitutive of tradition, and enshrined in every eucharistic liturgy worthy of the name, he is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. He has borne our sin on the cross and borne it away. He has suffered what sinners rightly deserved – the divine judgment, curse, condemnation and wrath – in order that they might be spared. While they were yet sinners, he died in their place, despite their enmity toward his person and work, that by his love they might themselves be made new. Alive eternally by his resurrection from the dead, he presents us perpetually to the Father in himself, and in himself the Father to us, in the power of his atoning sacrifice, his body and blood given for our sakes.

By constructing a theology that will not allow the church to say this *sort* of thing, but that is designed, in effect, to rule it out (1.192), Jenson subverts his ecumenical intentions, laudable as they are in every way, at the most sensitive point. Pious skeptics like Socinus (1.186), Schleiermacher (1.186n., 1.187), and Ebeling (1.189; cf. 1.166) lead him to define Jesus' 'sacrificial' death as just a human prayer *in extremis* (albeit one answered by the Father's raising him from the dead, 1.186–90, 192). The point is all too clear: Christ's death accomplishes nothing redemptive in itself.

The royal work of Christ fares little better. That by his perfect obedience as fulfilled in the cross Christ himself defeats, objectively, the powers hostile to God and that hold sinners in bondage, is dismissed as 'mythology' (1.193). While Jesus achieved a personal victory that was 'moral and spiritual' (1.193), the real saving event is again his resurrection, not his death. His death is little more than a final obstacle to be overcome, not the means appointed for our salvation. 'The Crucifixion is God's salvific action

[2] The word 'theory', though ubiquitous in modern discussion of the atonement, is an unfortunate misnomer that serves only to set up false expectations.

[3] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 231–319, esp. 240–4 and 317–19.

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just in that God overcomes it by the Resurrection' (1.182). Indeed, the cross, we are told, was not 'an original element' in the church's faith at all (1.180). We have arrived at perhaps the most bizarre of Jenson's doctrinal separations, that of the cross from the resurrection. The gospel is not really so much that Christ died for our sins (1.179), he insists, but rather that Jesus is risen. Christ's death is not the solution, merely a plight from which he, too, must be redeemed.[4]

Jenson's rejection of anything like an objective atonement (1.192(3) tells us something important about his doctrine of sin. The chapter on sin is in many ways one of the most commendable in the work (2.133–52). It can be read with profit by pastors, students, and lay persons as well as by academic theologians. Sin is not essentially a mistake, a failure or a mere imperfection. It is that which God does not will. Its possibility is consequently inexplicable (2.133–4). It has been permitted only as something that God can turn to his purposes despite itself (1.74–5). Idolatry, lust, injustice and despair are the forms of sin selected for discussion. Idolatry means that 'we will not let God be what he really is, the absolute Giver who brooks none of our contributions and who just so cannot be manipulated' (2.138). In constant search of a usable idol, 'we are sinners in that we revolve in our own self-reference and do so piously' (2.138). Lust is what results, as Augustine rightly saw, when God ceases to be the proper *telos* of our loves. It signifies our subjection to *libido*, which is at the same time our subjection to the *libido dominandi*. Lust is not merely a private but a communal disaster, displayed in constant infidelities at every level of social life (2.140–1). Closely linked to idolatry and lust, injustice is the Hobbesian war of all against all in which 'we oppress and subserve one another', parrying the demands of true community (2.143–5). (The analysis of Hobbes in this section is trenchant.) Despair and optimism are two sides of the same coin, in that both are the contrary of hope. Both, moreover, wrap themselves in the mantle of religion (2.145–6). 'Despair would be the essence of sin if it had one' (2.146). Finally, original sin is powerfully set forth as an encompassing guilt. 'Humanity is finally one diachronically

[4] Jenson's favored definition of the gospel – 'that Jesus is risen from the dead' (1.165) – must therefore be read with caution. By his own admission, he withdraws the cross from the centrality 'it has sometimes [!] occupied in theology' (1.179). On his own premises, however, the question has rather to be the centrality of the cross not merely in recent revisionary theologies, but in scripture, tradition (including theology), and liturgy *for the ecumenical church*. Not even the Eastern churches, with their salutary emphasis on Christ's resurrection, could tolerate such a drastic Socinian reduction of the saving significance of the cross. On the other hand, participating in the eucharistic liturgy takes precedence, for Jenson, over doctrinal views of the atonement (1.190).

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extended community, and that community and we in it are idolatrous, lustful, unjust and despairing' (2.150).

Despite this fine discussion, in which many true and illuminating things are said, the decisive point would seem to be lacking. Divine judgment against sin is not adequately grasped. Discussion of divine judgment, deferred until hundreds of pages later (2.324–6), yields only the vague definition that judgment is God's 'intervention to restore community' (2.325). That sin is an abomination, that it is cause for genuine terror, that it means being ultimately and totally guilty before God, that all human ungodliness (vertical) and wickedness (horizontal) meet with divine wrath, that this wrath is not averted, that it is administered to the full in the service of divine grace, that one has died for all, that in him therefore all have died, that divine righteousness is not compromised one whit, that it is turned to serve an inexhaustible mercy, that grace is costly precisely in this sense – these are themes as completely absent from Jenson as from so much other modern, wishful theology. By repudiating Christ's cross as an atoning sacrifice in any objective sense, Jenson remains as alienated from the kinds of theology, tradition and liturgy that constitute the ecumenical church, despite every onslaught of modernity, as the unfortunate exemplars that he otherwise sets out, so often, to overcome. In short, Jenson's God restores community without properly expiating sin.

Although Jenson writes an entire chapter about 'our place in God', he says nothing about 'God in our place'. He has almost completely lost sight of the perfect tense. He expressly rejects that 'Christ fully accomplished our salvation at Golgotha' (1.179); likewise, that the 'defining claim' of the church's message is that 'Jesus died for us' (as if the church must choose between these affirmations and their complement that 'Jesus is risen') (1.179). Jenson's one-sided emphasis on resurrection leads to an equally one-sided emphasis on the *Christus praesens*. 'We start with the risen Jesus, in the present tense' (2.251). When Jenson speaks about Christ's priesthood, it is always only 'the present reality of Christ's priesthood' (2.253) that he intends. Not until *after* his resurrection does Christ even function as priest (1.192). When Jenson states that the presence of the crucified Son is our salvation (1.181), the weight falls, soteriologically, on Christ's presence, not on his crucifixion. 'Jesus' sacrifice accomplishes our reconciliation only when we are actually brought together with him and his Father in one community', i.e. only in the present tense (1.192). The problematic word here is *only*. Christ's presence is not the contemporary (eucharistic) actualization of himself in his finished and perfect obedience as fulfilled for our salvation in the cross. His presence is, rather, the abstracted means by which salvation takes place in any sense at all.

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The soteriological issue can be illustrated by contrasting a circle with an ellipse. A circle is constituted, of course, by a single center, whereas an ellipse gives us two foci.[5] The circle would mean that salvation is centered solely and entirely in Christ; the ellipse, that Christ at one focal point is the condition for the possibility of a salvation that does not become fully actual until appropriated at the other point by the church. The circle would mean that salvation has occurred essentially in the perfect tense; the ellipse, that the perfect tense is supplemented by the present tense (or in Jenson's case virtually eclipsed by it).[6] Either salvation is a perfect actuality in Christ to be received and partaken of for what it is, or else it is an existential possibility that does not become fully actual and complete until the church happens to receive it. If salvation is essentially in the perfect tense, then its present and future tenses must be seen as modes of receiving and participating in the one salvation already accomplished in Christ. If, on the other hand, salvation occurs essentially in the present tense, then its present and future tenses must somehow supplement and complete a process that Christ initiated in his earthly existence, but did not entirely fulfill.[7]

Although Jenson's account is not without its happy inconsistencies, his technical decisions require him to espouse an extreme version of the ellipse with two foci, a version that threatens to resolve itself into a new and different circle whose center is not Christ but the Spirit, or indeed not Christ but the church. Because it is false, according to Jenson, to believe that Christ fully accomplished our salvation at Golgotha, salvation's full accomplishment would seem then to depend inexorably on Pentecost, conceived as *supplemental* event. The modern Orthodox ecumenist Nikos Nissiotis is cited approvingly that the Pentecostal coming of the Spirit is 'a new intervention of the Holy Trinity in time' (1.146n.). Whether Nissiotis really sees Pentecost as supplemental (as Lossky seems to), however, is doubtful. In any case, even Jenson finds the supplemental explanation of 'new intervention' (made inevitable by his loss of salvation's perfect tense) hard to sustain with full consistency. One volume and many pages later, Jenson's ecumenical interests happily lead him in another direction. As a matter of

[5] These images have been famously proposed by Karl Barth, who saw what was at stake, and who powerfully urged the first option. For a discussion unsurpassed in its incisiveness, whether in Barth's own corpus or elsewhere, see his *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), pp. 250–7.

[6] Jenson's heavy reliance on the existentialist concept of 'word-event' is a symptom of this eclipse.

[7] For a further account of these themes, and for an illustration of a soteriology grounded consistently in the perfect tense, see my essay 'The Dimension of Depth: Thomas F. Torrance on the Sacraments', *SJT* 54 (2001), pp. 155–76.

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firm ecumenical consensus, he acknowledges, the eucharist cannot possibly be regarded as 'repeating' or 'supplementing' Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross (2.217, 266). In a quotation, cited favorably, we read: 'In the Eucharistic memorial ''Christ himself with all he has accomplished for us . . . is present . . . granting us communion with himself.'' . . . The Holy Spirit in the Eucharist actualizes that which Christ has performed' (2.226). Note the unexpected re-emergence of salvation's perfect tense, previously evacuated of all meaning along Socinian, liberal and existentialist lines. The quotation is not only compatible with the soteriology of the circle, but would also seem logically to require it (as opposed to that of the ellipse). When Jenson the ecumenist does not agree with Jenson the existentialist, the former, to my mind, is to be preferred. How these different strands in his argument can be reconciled, however, is not easy to comprehend.

The incarnation: monophysite, adoptionist and Arian tendencies

The question of Christ, the Spirit and the church must be deferred to a later point. It will be instructive to move now from Christ's work to his person, that is, from the cross to the incarnation. Jenson's statements about Christ's person are among the most vexing in the text. High, orthodox-sounding affirmations occur side by side with others that, from a traditional point of view, seem strangely monophysite, adoptionist and even Arian by turns. The single-minded rigor with which Jenson thinks through the utter novelty of his proposals can only be admired. Perhaps I am not the only reader, however, who will find the results to be truly perplexing.

Ecumenical theology, as Jenson pursues it, requires allegiance to the decisions of ecumenical councils like Nicaea and Chalcedon. In trying to reconcile the novelty of his views with the authority of the councils, Jenson is nothing if not conscientious and resourceful. The sheer bravura of his effort is bracing to behold. But is it not rather like trying to square the circle? Unable to gain a clear picture, I can offer only a set of worries.

The relationship between Christ's person and his work, as traditionally understood by the ecumenical church, is conveniently summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism. While the idiom is Reformed, the sort of thing affirmed is an ecumenical commonplace.

> Question 15. What kind of mediator and redeemer, then, must we seek? Answer: One who is a true and righteous human being and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is at the same time true God.[8]

[8] 'The Heidelberg Catechism', in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper and Row, 1931), pp. 307–55, at 312 (my translation).

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A redeemer who was less than truly human could not possibly embody our plight (Q. 16), yet who was less than truly God could not possibly overcome it (Q. 17). Following the Chalcedonian definition, special care has therefore always been taken in the ecumenical church to safeguard not only the indissoluble union of Christ's unabridged deity and humanity ('without separation or division') but also their ineffaceable distinction ('without confusion or change'). The Lutheran confessions, it is interesting to note, could make a special point of *not* losing the distinction. Concerning the person of Christ, 'false doctrine' was rejected: 'That the human nature has been raised to the level of, and has become equal to, the divine nature in its substance and essence, or in its essential properties.'[9] Again, along the same lines: 'For the human nature [of Christ] . . . is not capable of the omnipotence of God in such a way that it would become omnipotent essence intrinsically or have omnipotent properties intrinsically. Thereby Christ's human nature would be denied and completely transformed into Godhead.'[10]

Whether Jenson's view of Christ's person actually deviates from the intention of such statements, or whether, if so, he has made a case that it really shouldn't matter, are not easy questions to decide. When Jenson summarizes the Chalcedonian definition, the abiding *distinction* between deity and humanity in Christ's person does not always seem robustly upheld (1.18). His conscious intention not to dissolve Christ's deity into his humanity is plain, but his slippery formulations leave room for doubt. He departs from recent scholarship by regarding Chalcedon as a clear victory for Leo rather than Cyril.[11] In part, that is because he focuses on the entire Chalcedonian decree, which received 'The Tome of Leo' into its proceedings, as opposed to the more limited (and more authoritative) definition of faith (1.130–3). He rightly notes that Chalcedon authorizes such cross-over statements as 'God the Son died' or 'This man, Jesus, is the Lord' (1.18). But what about those important Chalcedonian stipulations – which, as McGuckin has shown, actually derive from Cyril[12] – 'without confusion' (*asynchytos*) and 'without change' (*atreptos*)?

It is hard not to feel that Jenson is flirting with monophysitism. 'According to our christological conclusions,' he writes, 'the identity of the eternal Son *is* the human person Jesus' (2.99, italics added). The strange

[9] 'The Formula of Concord', Epitome, Article VIII in *The Book of Concord*, ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), p. 490.

[10] 'The Formula of Concord', Solid Declaration, Article VIII in *The Book of Concord*, p. 605.

[11] For the contrary view, see John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy, Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), pp. 227–44.

[12] Ibid., pp. 238–40.

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logic of Jenson's theological equations, and his bizarre use of the rhetoric of 'is', will give us more than one pause for puzzlement. Does this statement mean that 'the human person Jesus' actually exhausts 'the identity of the eternal Son' without remainder, so that no eternal *hypostasis* subsists apart from the human person in any sense? Much in Jenson's argument would seem to point in this direction. The statement could, however, be unexceptional, meaning only that the Son's identity is *inseparable* from that of Jesus. The relation would then be a synthetic one of unity as opposed to a strict identity ('is and is only'). Jenson seems to substitute the idea of two 'perspectives' on Jesus for the traditional idea of two 'natures' in Christ (2.271). The eternal Son and the human Jesus, we are told, do not coinhere 'merely simultaneously' (1.136). Rather, 'this human personality [as such?] *is* . . . an identity of God' (1.137, italics added).[13] 'The second identity of God is *directly* the human person of the Gospels' (1.137, italics added). A '*defining attribute of deity*', Jenson seems to assert, is actually 'the *man* Jesus' (2.255, italics added). Jenson denies that Jesus is 'a hybrid of deity and humanity' (1.132; cf. 1.144). Yet in his very humanity, it would seem, the earthly Jesus just *is* God, even as in his very deity he just *is* human. Where the tradition sees unity, Jenson posits dialectical identity. Where the traditional relation is synthetic, Jenson's is analytic. Is the resultant Jesus-figure – who is something like Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit – monophysite?

Adoptionistic-sounding statements lead to similar puzzles. 'Christ's Sonship', we are told, 'comes ''from'' his Resurrection' (1.143). 'He is Son in that he is resurrected' (1.142). Does Jenson actually mean that Jesus was adopted as the Son at his resurrection? Maybe not, for Jesus 'made himself' the Son of God by addressing God as his Father (1.45). Is that how Jesus became the Son? 'Making oneself' the Son would seem to be rather different from addressing God as one's Father just because one *is* the Son. 'Jesus' Resurrection is his ''determination'' as the eternal Son and so his ''determination'' as the divine Word *ad extra*' (2.271). Strangely, we read: 'Jesus would not be the Word without the Resurrection' (1.171). How can that be? 'The Word of God . . . is actual *only* as conversation with us' (1.228, italics added). Really? At other places, however, the less loaded idea of confirmation is used. 'The Father has raised Jesus to confirm his sonship' (2.185). Jesus' address to God as his Father was 'a confirmation of his reality as the one God' (1.116). Well, which is it? Does Christ's resurrection

[13] Jenson, for reasons of his own, substitutes the word *identity* for words like *person* or *subsistence* in standard trinitarian discourse. Admittedly, *hypostasis* is a hard term to translate. In more traditional language, 'an identity of God' would be 'a person of the trinity', and 'the second identity of God' would be 'the second person of the trinity'.

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merely confirm his reality as the Son, or does it actually constitute it? And what about Jesus' address to God as his Father? Does it make him the Son, or merely confirm his deity? To Jenson, it would seem, such traditional questions don't really matter. Why not?

The Arian controversy may provide a clue. Although Jenson departs radically from Arianism, he shares at least one significant conviction in common with Arius – even while turning him upside down and inside out. Arius and the original Arians are assessed with discrimination: 'Some of their core convictions were biblical; others were self-evidencies of the culture' (1.100). When they defined God as atemporal, impassible and immortal, they reflected biases that were cultural. By insisting that the Savior must be capable of suffering and death, they were biblical. Yet if the Savior is the divine Logos, how can he suffer and die? The Arians concluded that the Logos must be a creature, even if of a very special sort. Divine generation of the Logos could only have been temporal not eternal. The Son who suffered and died could not have been divine. Only the Father was divine, because only he remained immune from time, suffering and death.

To the Arian problem, Jenson offers a new and bizarre solution. The Savior, he agrees, must be capable of time, suffering and death. Since the Savior must also be essentially divine, however, Jenson goes on to deny the premise he had insisted was merely cultural, namely, that God is atemporal, impassible and immortal. Jenson's denial of this premise, which determines his entire theological system, has the most far-reaching of consequences. Those that are more nearly trinitarian will be taken up in due course. Here the focus must remain on the person of Christ.

Perhaps the most famous of the Arian slogans was 'There was when he was not'.[14] The Son, in other words, did not subsist from all eternity in the divine being, but rather came into being, like all other creatures, in time. Other fragments from Arius point in exactly the same direction: 'God was not always a Father, but once God was alone, for the Word was not with him.'[15] 'Not yet was he a Father, but afterwards became a Father.'[16] 'Not always was the Son, for he was not before his begetting.'[17] 'The Father

[14] Arius as quoted in a fragment preserved by Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, 1.5: *ên pote oti ouk ên*. For this and other fragments from Arius, I am following the unpublished work of Ford Lewis Battles, 'Arius, Thalia: A Hypothetical Reconstruction of the Text' (Pittsburgh, 1968). Battles draws mainly on Gustave Bardy, 'La Thalie d'Arius', *Revue de Philologie* 53 (1927), pp. 211–33.

[15] From Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, 1.5, along with Athanasius, *Epistola ad episkopos Aegypti et Libyae* 12: *ouk aei o theos patêr ên, all' en ote o theos monos en, kai ouk ên o logos sun autô*.

[16] *Epistola* 12, *kai oupô patêr ên. usteron epigegone patêr*.

[17] *Contra Arianos*, 1.9: *ouk aei ên o uios. ou gar ên prin gennêthê*.

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existed before the Son.'[18] 'So the Son of God, though from the Father, also came out of non-being.'[19] 'For just as all things were created and came into being, so he too is something made, a creature.'[20] 'So also he was made by the will of God and did not exist before.'[21] In short, the Son, like all other creatures, came into being out of nothing, and so was of a completely different essence than the Father.

This is where Jenson curiously turns Arius on his head. Although *the divine Son* did indeed come into being out of nothing, like all other creatures, that does not, Jenson avers, disqualify him from being God. All we have to do is change our definition of deity. Jenson does not deny the Arian slogan 'There was when he was not'. He accepts it, with qualifications. What he denies is the premise that divine being is necessarily atemporal, impassible and immortal. For Jenson, the finite is not only capable of the infinite; in a certain sense, it *is* the infinite. The temporal is not only capable of the eternal; in a certain sense, it *is* the eternal. Given the metaphysical framework that thereby results, Jenson's understanding of Christ's person is so close to that rejected by the Council of Nicaea that it may fairly be called, if not 'Arian', then certainly at least 'neo-Arian'.

'There was when he was not.' According to Jenson, only God the Father (not the holy trinity) creates the world out of nothing, only God the Father makes the pre-temporal decision of election, and only God the Father is the God of Israel. The Son, strictly speaking, does not yet exist. Jenson does not broadcast these entailments of his redefinition of God. He seems to recognize that without further qualification they would be completely unacceptable to the ecumenical church. He indeed attempts a complex strategy of qualification. Nevertheless, the fairness of these observations can be seen from his discussion of Christ's 'pre-existence'.

'The Father,' writes Jenson, 'just as the singular identity so named, is the ''pre-'' of all being' (2.173). Restated in a more traditional idiom: as the first person of the trinity, the Father alone is the 'pre-' of all being. 'All being' here means 'all divine' as well as 'all creaturely' being – a version of the traditional idea, developed especially in Eastern orthodox theology, of the Father's 'monarchy'. However, since, for Jenson, the Son enjoys no antecedent reality prior to his coming to be in history, the eternal trinity enjoys no antecedent reality, strictly speaking, prior to the creation of the

[18] Quoted in Epiphanius, *Hares*, drawn from Marcellus of Ancyra, *Epistola ad Julium*: *eti mentoi kai prouparchein tou uiou ton patera*.

[19] Quoted by Athanasius in *Epistola* 12: *kai o uios tou theou alla kan ek tou theou ex ouk ontôn esti*.

[20] *Contra Arianos* 1.5 with *Epistola* 12: *kai pantôn ontôn ktismatôn kai poiêmaton genomenôn, kai autos ktisma kai poiêma estin*.

[21] Athanasius, *Epistola* 12: *outô kai autos tô boulêmati tou theou ouk proteron gegonen*.

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world. In the beginning, the reality of the trinity (what Jenson evasively calls 'the triune life') is merely embryonic and potential. Only at the end is the trinity fully actualized, because only in the course of history does the trinity work out its own self-actualization. Since, however, the trinity must be antecedent in some sense, Jenson solves this problem by oddly equating the Father (who contains 'triune life' within himself) with the antecedent trinity (1.122). Strictly speaking, therefore, only the Father is pre-existent. The holy trinity is pre-existent only by way of intention (2.27–8). Therefore, it is the 'particular role' of the Father to 'initiate' the 'mere existence' of the creatures (i.e. to create them) (2.38). Similarly, only the Father is the God of Israel (1.115), or (the language is always slippery) 'the Father is Creator as he is the God of Israel' (2.26), or 'the Father is both the God of Israel and one identity of the God of Israel' (1.124). The subsequence of the actualized trinity is clear. The Son is not begotten by the Father, nor does the Spirit proceed from him, antecedently to the creation of the world.

The correctness of this line of interpretation is confirmed when Jenson takes up the pre-temporal decision of election (whose object, but not whose acting subject, is the Son). With an explicitness that leaves nothing to be desired, Jenson states: 'The Father, exactly in his identity as the Father, is the sole antecedent chooser and sender in this decision' (2.176). How could it be otherwise, since, strictly speaking, the Son and the Spirit (as will be seen more fully in due course) do not yet actually (i.e. historically) exist (except by way of the Father's antecedent intention)? What 'ontologically precedes' the historical begetting of the second person of the trinity (in Jenson's lingo 'the sole actual second identity') is nothing more than a 'narrative pattern' (1.141). Jenson states: 'What in eternity precedes the Son's birth to Mary is not an unincarnate *state* of the Son, but a pattern of movement within the event of the Incarnation, the movement to incarnation, itself a pattern in God's triune life' (1.141). What antecedently exists with the Father in eternity is not a person (*hypostasis*) – the same in substance, equal in power and glory – but merely a pattern; not the Word, but the condition for its possibility; not a Son eternally begotten, but only a Son eternally intended; not a Son whose actual begetting occurs antecedently to history, but a Son whose begetting occurs subsequently (and only subsequently) at a point in history – indeed, a begetting that coincides more nearly with his resurrection than with his so-called 'incarnation'.

The 'pre-existence' of Christ is a theme that Jenson redefines so that it really means 'post-existence' instead. From a more traditional point of view, this redefinition may seem like a fast-talking shell game. The argument's curious dialectic goes something like this: 'Black does not mean black. It means white. But since black means white, white also means

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black.' When the NT says 'in the beginning' or 'before the foundation of the world', therefore, it does not really mean what it says. 'In the beginning' really means 'at the end'. 'Before the foundation of the world' means 'after its final redemption'. Christ's 'pre-existence' means his 'post-existence' (1.142). What constitutes Jesus' sonship is 'not his birth *or* a pre-existence but his Resurrection' (ibid.). 'The eternal pre- of Christ's existence' is found in (and only in) the Father's decision to raise him from the dead (2.177). When we speak of the 'pre-existence' of Christ, therefore, 'this 'pre' is primarily the priority of God's futurity . . . the priority of his anteriority . . .: and just so it is the reconciliation of both . . .' (2.177). Christ is constituted as the Alpha only by becoming the Omega. But because he is the Omega, he is also somehow the Alpha. Since 'pre-existence' means 'post-existence', his 'post-existence' is his 'pre-existence'. Those to whom this reasoning makes sense will have little problem with Jenson's metaphysics.

'The Son . . . has his own individual entity *within* created time' (2.27). The Son is a 'specific personal history' (2.45). 'God the Son and this man are one hypostasis' (2.287). Having turned Arius upside down (by proposing to redefine the meaning of the Son's *deity* so that it comports with the Arian statement 'Not always was the Son, for he was not before his [historical] begetting'), Jenson also at the same time turns Arius inside out. For Arius, God was primordially determinate. For Jenson, God is teleologically determinate, but primordially indeterminate. For Nicaea and Constantinople, God was primordially determinate just because eternally (antecedentally) self-actualized as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is Jenson's teleological self-constitution of the trinity, along with his historical constitution of the Son's deity, that puts him on a collision course not just with the intentions of Arius, but precisely with those of Nicaea.

Jenson labors mightily to redefine Nicaea's famous *homoousia* so that it will fit within the requirements of his proposed metaphysics (a monist metaphysics, it seems, that might be called 'dialectical historicism' with a trinitarian and teleological contour). The *human* Jesus is 'of one being with the Father', Jenson proposes, just because the love actual in him is 'inexhaustible' (1.221); or because he teaches and acts as God, yet self-effacingly 'turns aside all attributions to himself of what belongs to the Father', and so makes himself the Father's 'perfect counterpart' (1.109); or because 'eternity is the inexhaustibility of the Son's life' (1.219). Whether this is a Nicene-compatible redefinition of *homoousia* is debatable. Most importantly, however, whereas Jenson could certainly affirm of the Son that he is 'begotten *and* made', he cannot (*logically* cannot, given his metaphysics) draw the contrasts indispensable to Nicaea, on which its rejection of

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Arianism fully depends. He cannot uphold the Nicene contrasts that ontologically constitute the Son apart from all creatureliness: 'begotten *before* all worlds' (*gennêthenta pro pantôn tôn aiônôn/natum ante omnia saecula*); 'begotten not made' (*gennêthenta ou poiêthenta/genitum non factum*). Any antecedent eternal begetting in God (so that the Son is ontologically the Son independently of the world) has been repudiated as systematically by Jenson as by Arius.[22]

Conclusion

What difference does it make? In any coherent soteriological scheme (and Jenson meets the test of coherence), Christ's person and work are mutually implicated. The person is suitable for a certain sort of work, even as the work, in turn, requires a certain sort of person. In Jenson's case, an 'Arian' (or better, 'neo-Arian')[23] view of Christ's person coheres with a 'Socinian' (or 'neo-Socinian') view of his saving significance.[24] For Jenson, Christ's saving significance is found not in his death but in his resurrection, or more precisely, in his death only as the resurrection's necessary precondition. Resurrection bears almost all the soteriological significance, because death is the only true plight that needs to be overcome. (Sin is, it seems, just forgiven arbitrarily without any means of expiation or atonement.) For Jenson, Jesus is the man predestined by God to overcome the plight of death. He is more nearly the redeemed Redeemer than the incarnate Savior,

[22] For Jenson's (weak) redefinition of 'begotten, not made', see 1.102, 2.345.

[23] I do not use the term 'neo-Arianism' in the historical sense as used by R. P. C. Hanson and others, but rather to mean something like 'Arianism in an unheard of, modern sense'. It is fascinating, by the way, to read what Hanson has to say about 'homoian Arianism' in light of Jenson's curious contentions about 'the Son'. See R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), pp. 557–97 (homoian Arianism) and pp. 598(636 (neo-Arianism in the historical sense).

[24] For a convenient account of Socinianism, see R. S. Franks, *The Work of Christ* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1918, 1962), pp. 362–77. Socinus saw Christ as 'a mortal man who has become immortal . . . and was finally raised to a power equal to God's own' (p. 363, quoting Harnack). His positive doctrine of Christ's work was that 'salvation proceeds from the mere will of God in pardoning sinners' (p. 365). 'The proper principle of the forgiveness of sins is therefore always the Divine will, and the sacrifice [of the cross] is merely an accidental condition' (p. 367). Christ's resurrection is 'the chief point and, as it were, foundation of the whole faith' (p. 366, quoting Socinus). 'Again the Resurrection, which could not take place without Christ's previous death, assures us of our own resurrection and the obtaining of eternal life . . .' (p. 374). As a complement to his view of Christ's work, note that Socinus's understanding of Christ's person is itself in some sense 'Arian' (in that adoptionism and Arianism are linked, both substantively and historically). For a detailed summary of Socinus's objections to the orthodox doctrine of atonement, see Albrecht Ritschl, *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1872), pp. 294–309.

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more nearly the instrument than the acting subject of our salvation. The man Jesus enters the 'triune life' by virtue of his resurrection. Through this resurrected God-man (or perhaps better, man-God) such life is then bestowed on us. For Jenson, the peculiar 'deity' of Jesus is intrinsically impotent in the face of death; his 'humanity' is not joined in hypostatic (synthetic) union with an antecedently omnipotent divine Son (as it needs to be for any soteriology where sin is expiated for our fallen race, and death defeated, by an incarnate Savior who is at once fully God and fully human, acting and suffering vicariously in our place and for our sakes). For Jenson, Jesus is the suffering, perishable creature predestined to be the second person of the trinity, not the divine Son who himself elected freely from all eternity (in obedience to the Father and in the communion of the Holy Spirit) to become incarnate, and so to assume to himself the full degradation of our guilt and its dreadful consequences, that we might be spared from condemnation and retrieved in him. Jenson does not so much posit the sort of intrinsically omnipotent human being that the Formula of Concord feared, as rather its reverse negative, an intrinsically impotent divine Son. The neo-Arian Jesus has no real choice but to die. Nor does he himself destroy death (any more than he expiates sin). It is the Father who destroys death by raising him from the dead. To perform a neo-Socinian saving work (intercessory submission to death) no more than a neo-Arian person is required (a mere mortal predestined somehow or other to be the Son).

The trinity: within the limits of historicism alone

Does Jenson give us a 'baptized' or an 'unbaptized' God? The answer would seem to be that he gives us a God whose baptism was administered by Hegel. It is Hegel, more than any other, who determines Jenson's view of the trinity (even as, for him, the cross is determined by Socinus and the 'incarnation' by a perfect inversion of Arius). Jenson develops his trinitarian proposal within the confines of a broadly 'Hegelian' metaphysics. Because, as he admits, the metaphysics of his work is presented only 'bit by bit' (2.150), it is not easy to gain a sense of the whole. It seems fair to suggest, however, that taken as a whole, the metaphysics is a version of panentheism (and therefore tends toward monism). That, more specifically, this metaphysics seems to be (as previously noted) a kind of 'dialectical historicism with a teleological contour' is what now needs to be unpacked.

Panentheism means that while God's being is not exhausted by the world, it is nonetheless in some sense constituted by the world. When panentheism takes the form of metaphysical historicism, God's being will in some sense be constituted by temporal events. When this historicism, in turn, assumes a teleological contour, the temporal constitution of God's

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being will not be fully actual apart from the *telos* of history. Finally, when the historicism is dialectical, the logic of this metaphysics will at crucial points be one of identity and difference. The many strange equations in Jenson's theology between that which is worldly and that which is divine are all expressions of this metaphysical dialectic.

The Hegelian proviso

Hegelian versions of panentheism allow for a significant (though restricted) measure of divine freedom. Although God needs the world in order to be fully actual as God, God is free to posit just which world it is that will serve to meet this need. As Brian Leftow has pointed out, 'for Hegel the existence of God strongly depends on the existence of *some* world, but weakly depends on the existence and precise nature of *this* world'.[25] Just which world will serve as the external basis for God's self-actualization is discretionary, but the strong necessity for some such world is not. 'Hegel', writes Leftow, 'considers God's full actuality the goal at which the world-process aims.'[26] Although God is not identical with the world, he cannot be fully actual without it.[27] The Hegelian idea that God is metaphysically conditioned by something other than himself, that God cannot be God without the world, that God must be conceived in fundamental dependence upon his creation – this is Jenson's idea of a properly 'baptized' God. That this metaphysical notion is really biblical, however, as Jenson relentlessly insists, would seem to be preposterous. In any case, that God is not and cannot possibly be fully actual as the holy trinity without the world – an idea implicitly and explicitly rejected by Nicaea and Constantinople – would seem to have no real prospects in the ecumenical church.

The Hegelian proviso that God has real discretion over precisely which world will serve as the platform for his trinitarian self-actualization is constantly invoked by Jenson. The proviso, as Jenson uses it, is meant to highlight God's freedom in actualizing himself as the holy trinity and to gloss over his metaphysical dependence on the world. The metaphysical

[25] Brian Leftow, 'God and the World in Hegel and Whitehead', in *Hegel and Whitehead: Contemporary Perspectives on Systematic Philosophy*, ed. George R. Lucas, Jr (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 257–67, at p. 262.

[26] Ibid.

[27] This interpretation seems to be confirmed by Hodgson in his 'Introduction' to *G. W. F. Hegel: Theologian of the Spirit*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). Apart from the world, says Hodgson, the being of Hegel's God is merely abstract, indeterminate and empty. 'God becomes the sort of God that God is only by self-realization in world-process' (p. 33). God's being is thus 'dependent on the process for its self-actualization' (p. 10).

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dependency, however, is merely rhetorically veiled by this proviso, while also of course presupposed by it. Here is an example of Jenson's rhetoric:

> Presumably God could have been himself on different terms, established his identity without reference to us or the time he makes for us, and so without confronting the death which closes our stories in that time. But, of this possibility, we can assert only the sheer contrafactual; about *how* God would then have been the same God we now know, we can say nothing whatever. As it is, God's story is committed as a story with creatures. And so he too, as it is, can have no identity except as he meets the temporal end toward which creatures live. (1.65)

This passage fallaciously equates commitment with strong dependence, as if a metaphysically independent God could not freely commit himself to the world, or as if God's free commitment to the world necessarily made him dependent upon it for the constitution of his metaphysical identity. The apostolic witness as received by the ecumenical church in holy scripture, as interpreted in its broad theological tradition, and as incorporated into its liturgies does not deny but affirms that God in Jesus Christ has confronted death (not to mention *sin*) and so met the temporal end toward which creatures live. But it necessarily denies that in undertaking this free and perfect work of grace, God is at the same time 'establishing' his metaphysical identity, as if it were not already established eternally in itself. The historic (and, I should think, non-negotiable) position of the ecumenical church is that the one eternal God reveals but does not constitute his (metaphysical) identity in history.

Again, with a more explicit trinitarian reference:

> Father, Son, and Spirit are the actual God. We may of course note another abstract possibility: this God could have been Father, Son, and Spirit otherwise than as the crucified Jesus and *his* Father and Spirit. But immediately we must, as this work has several times insisted, embrace our inability to fill in that 'otherwise.' (2.23)

The use of the word 'abstract' in this passage is tendentious, as if the holy trinity of historic dogma and doctrine – eternal, self-sufficient and self-actualized in itself, and therefore metaphysically independent of the world – were not necessarily the *ens concretissimum*. Again, for the ecumenical church, the cross of Christ presupposes and reveals, but does not metaphysically constitute, God's triune identity. The connection between the trinity and the cross, as grounded wholly in the freedom and faithfulness of God, is one of pure self-giving and not of metaphysical necessity, of sheer gratuitous grace uncompelled by *any* pressures of a supposed *need* for self-

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constitution. Of course we do not know *how* God would have been the holy trinity without the cross, but we may at least say that God would not have been one whit less God without it, because it is not the holy trinity that depends on the cross but the cross that depends on the holy trinity.

Finally, in fairness, one last instance:

> There is a set of questions that is often confused with the question of the Son's precedence as God to his actuality as the God-man: What if God had not created? Would he not still have been the same God he is? And would not the Son then have been the same one he is, although he could not have been Jesus? Would there not have been an unincarnate *Logos* who was just that? The answer to all the last three questions must be Yes. But having answered the contrary-to-fact questions themselves, we must resolutely say no more. About *how* God could have been other than *Jesus* the Son and *his* Father and *their* Spirit, or about what that would have been like, we can know or guess nothing whatsoever. (1.141)

Despite appearances to the contrary, God's metaphysical dependency on the world – if not necessarily this world then certainly some other world – is still presupposed by this passage. Only so can it be read in a way that is consistent with Jenson's explicit insistence, in the same context, that, in actual fact, the Son enjoys no ontologically antecedent, unincarnate state: 'There is no such thing, to be known or unknown' (1.142; cf. 1.77, 139, 141). Of course, according to the Hegelian proviso, 'the Son could have been an unincarnate Son', but here as always (for Jenson) this is a decidedly 'contrary-to-fact proposition' (1.142). Once again we may look to a Hegelian background for elucidation. As Cyril O'Regan has pointed out, Hegel does not deny an ontologically prior immanent trinity. Like Jenson, 'he continually insists . . . that distinctions do exist in the divine and that these distinctions are noncollapsible'.[28] Nevertheless, 'the ''Immanent Trinity'' represents neither the full compass of the divine nor the full realization of personhood'.[29] Whatever their prior ontological or metaphysical status may be (and it seems to be merely proleptic, embryonic or indeterminate), the persons of the trinity are not and cannot possibly be fully actual in themselves without 'becoming within the milieu of finitude . . . The role of finitude in the self-development of the divine is impossible to overestimate.'[30] Only in this Hegelian sense, it seems, does Jenson affirm

[28] Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 138. See also pp. 63–80.
[29] Ibid., p. 141.
[30] Ibid.

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the sameness of the trinity apart from this world. He does not surrender his adherence to the idea that in order to be fully actual the triune God is strongly dependent, metaphysically, on this or some other world.[31]

Dialectical identity

Along Hegelian lines, the relationship that Jenson posits between God and the world would seem to involve some element of dialectical identity.[32] The actual identity point, at which God and the world are metaphysically one, would seem to be the *telos* of history. History's *telos* is at once Jesus of Nazareth and the world's future as he embodies, mediates and anticipates it. Because history has a dialectical identity point, however, the metaphysical difference between God and the world, between divine being and creaturely being, is only relative and not categorical. Consequently, the trinity's metaphysical dependence on the world is worked out (as noted) within a scheme of panentheistic historicism. Before taking up Jenson's trinitarian proposal more directly, it will be helpful to examine the general shape of this scheme.

Jenson clearly affirms that God and the world are not the same. 'That God creates means that there is other reality than God and that it is really other than he' (2.5). Does the metaphysical difference between God and the world, then, rule out the possibility of a dialectical identity point? Perhaps so, for Jenson rejects 'the emanationist temptation' (2.6) while affirming the idea of creation *ex nihilo* (2.12). Other passages, however, would seem to point in another direction. What are we to make of a sentence, for example, that begins with the words: '*Insofar as* to be a creature is to be other than God . . .' (2.48, italics added)? Is this a merely rhetorical qualification? Or is it also somehow metaphysical? Curiously, we are told: 'to think of God as simply one thing and creatures as another' is a 'fatal error' (1.224). How can that be? Because, apparently, 'the relations between him and us

[31] Elsewhere Jenson does say that God's 'love' would be 'fully actual' in the 'triune life' without God's act of creating, as would God's intrinsic relationality and activity (2.28). This statement is not unambiguous, nor is it incompatible with the Hegelian proviso. Either the holy trinity (not just its 'love' or its 'life') is fully actual in and for itself without the world's creation, or else the created world (or some world) is somehow implicated in the trinity's full metaphysical self-constitution. Everything in Jenson's argument points away from the former and toward the latter proposition.

[32] Again, however, it is very difficult to draw Jenson's piecemeal (and often compressed) remarks together in order to gain a proper sense of the whole. Here as elsewhere throughout this essay, my analysis can have no more than the status of an interpretative *hypothesis*. This status must be everywhere kept in mind, even though it would be tedious to keep drawing attention to it. If a better (and more favorable) reading of Jenson can plausibly be offered, I will be the first to embrace it.

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are not merely extrinsic' (1.225). Interesting. Could these intrinsic relations be, in some sense, a matter of metaphysical necessity? Along the same lines, no real 'gulf' is said to exist between 'deity and time' (1.103), because 'time and eternity are not mere contraries' (1.173). If time and eternity are not mere contraries, then neither are the world and God.

Highly ambiguous in this regard is the language of 'identification'. Jenson uses this language repeatedly, at almost every crucial point. Dependency in the strong and necessary Hegelian sense, as explained by Leftow and O'Regan, is often what seems to be at stake. If so, many pieces in the interpretive puzzle fall into place. The God of the gospel, according to Jenson, is a God 'whose deity is identified with a person of our history' (1.103). Deity is 'identified' with Jesus, it seems, in the strong sense. It is not otherwise fully actual. Jenson could not be more emphatic: '*Any* pattern of thought that in *any* way abstracts God ''himself'' from this person' is out of court (1.103, italics added).[33] This repudiation of 'abstraction' seems to be a remark about metaphysical dependency.

For Jenson, it seems, Jesus is the dialectical pivot who at once embodies God's dependency on the world while yet who also, through resurrection from death, elevates the world into God. Although the dialectical Jesus-figure fulfills two metaphysical histories at once – God's history of dependence on the world and the world's history of dependence on God – these are 'not ontologically symmetrical' (1.138). Metaphysical historicism, in this case, is properly panentheistic. 'Christ's human history happens because his divine history happens' (1.138), and it is the latter that takes ontological precedence as the world's encompassing ground and goal. 'God is infinite as we are not' (2.302). Nonetheless, within this ontological asymmetry the whole reality of God would seem somehow to be dialectically identical, in Jesus, with the whole reality of the world. Together they constitute one life in two aspects, a single metaphysical entity (1.114). The risen Jesus at once constitutes and yet delimits God's metaphysical dependence on the world. Jesus' resurrection is God's transcendence of the world on which God nonetheless depends for his full actualization (2.254). The identity and difference of God with the world is thereby constituted, metaphysically and dialectically, by Jesus' death and resurrection (1.170).

The trinity as bi-polar: temporal immanence

In any panentheistic scheme God is metaphysically bi-polar, consisting of a transcendental aspect (which is necessarily prior) as well as an aspect

[33] The word *himself* appears in scare quotes here, because, as we will see, according to Jenson God doesn't really have a 'self'.

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immanent to the world. In panentheistic historicism both aspects will be dynamic, insofar as they are essentially related to or constituted by time. Constructed within such a scheme, Jenson's doctrine of the trinity evidences both aspects, each of which will be examined in turn.

The trinity's immanent aspect, necessary to God's full actualization, is constituted, for Jenson, by temporal events. In a chapter called 'The Triune Identity' he writes: 'Father, Son and Spirit are three *personae* of the story that is at once God's story and ours. Insofar as the triune narrative is about us, it is about creatures; insofar as it is about God, it is about the Creator' (1.110). 'Insofar as' signals a structure of dialectical identity: 'the triune history as our history is the creature of the triune history as the history that God is' (1.110). The dialectic, so stated, involves elements of identity ($x = y$ / 'triune history' = 'our history'), difference ($x \neq y$ / creature $\neq$ creature), and asymmetry ($x > y$ / 'is the creature of'). The element of identity, however, is undoubtedly metaphysical. There are, Jenson asserts, 'real narrative differentiations . . . in God', that is, 'among the identities' (i.e. real differentiations in time on which the persons of the trinity depend for their identities) (1.111). In its immanent aspect, the trinity is not just revealed but constituted, metaphysically, by the temporal differentiations that define (for Jenson) Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The trinity does not otherwise become fully actual than 'as the history that God is' (1.110). (That Jenson's attempt to align this patently Hegelian idea with Nicaea and the Cappadocians is dubious will emerge in due course.)

Although in language that is often less than fully precise, many similar statements can be found. They imply not only that God's triune identity involves God's immanence in time, but also that the trinity's temporality is metaphysically constitutive. Here are a few further examples. 'The one God is an *event*; history occurs not only in him but as his being' (1.221). 'The life of God is constituted in a structure of relations, whose own referents are narrative' (1.218; 2.35). 'God's being, ''into its furthest depths,'' is historical' (1.223). 'A conceptual move has been made from the biblical God's selfidentification *by* events in time to his identification *with* those events' (1.59). Significantly, 'the whole argument of the work depends on this move' (1.59). 'Events, of course, happen to something. What the event of God happens to is, first, the triune persons. The fundamental statement of God's being is therefore: God is what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit' (1.221). Clearly, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not fully actual apart from their temporal occurrence.

The immanent aspect of God's metaphysical reality is also in some sense teleological. As previously indicated, God is not fully constituted as God apart from the *telos* of history. God's life is 'ordered by an Outcome that is

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his outcome, and so in a freedom that is more than abstract aseity' (1.160) – as if God's aseity would necessarily be 'abstract' if it were fully actual in and for itself apart from history. 'The dynamism of God's life is a narrative causation in and so *of* God' (1.160, italics added). God's metaphysical reality is therefore an 'eschatological reality', not only for us, but also 'for himself' (1.160). Moreover, because the *telos* of history is proleptically identical with the resurrection of Jesus, 'God . . . establishes [God's] deity by the Resurrection' (1.189), as if it were otherwise metaphysically in doubt. Likewise, the cross of Christ is metaphysically constitutive, because 'the Crucifixion settled *who and what* God is' (1.189), again, as if it were otherwise objectively uncertain. 'Jesus' abandonment and death do not interrupt the [temporal] relation to the Father by which he is the Son but, rather, belong [metaphysically] to that relation. But that is to say that these blatantly temporal events belong to [Jesus'] very deity' (1.49). As will be shown in due course, the full consequences of this temporal conception of God's metaphysical actuality can only be disastrous for the doctrine of the trinity.

The trinity as bi-polar: temporal transcendence

Not surprisingly, the trinity's transcendental aspect is conceived in a necessary relation to its immanent aspect. It complicates but does not contradict God's metaphysical dependence upon the world. With respect to God's transcendental aspect, God's metaphysical dependency is everywhere presupposed. Without this transcendental aspect, the result would be mere pantheism; but as it is panentheism results instead. Whether the strong undertow toward a blended creator/creature monism can finally be arrested, however, as Jenson wishes, is a nice question, not easy to decide. In any case, the transcendental aspect – which is Jenson's proposal about God's 'eternity' – has three defining features: teleological, temporal and supra-temporal.

The triune God's eternity is teleological in that it is constituted (according to Jenson) as a 'temporal infinity'. 'God's eternity is temporal infinity' (1.218). 'What Father, Son and Spirit have from each other to be three identities of *God*, and what characterizes their mutual action *as* God, is limitlessness' (1.216). The temporal infinity of the trinity ('eternity') is teleological. God 'is *temporally* infinite because ''source'' and ''goal'' are present *and* asymmetrical in him, because he is primarily future to himself and only thereupon past and present to himself' (1.217). God's eternal being, therefore, is not 'timeless'. It is rather at once metaphysically determined by time's real distinctions (past, present, future), while yet also being superior to them. Because God's temporal infinity is teleological,

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God's being is teleological. God himself is 'the *Eschatos*' (1.67 n.16; 2.172). He 'is *not* eternal in that he adamantly remains as he began, *but* in that he always creatively opens to what he will be; *not* in that he hangs on, *but* in that he gives and receives; *not* in that he perfectly persists, *but* in that he perfectly anticipates' (1.217, italics added). Or again: 'The biblical God is *not* eternally himself in that he persistently instantiates a beginning in which he already is all he ever will be; he is eternally himself in that he unrestrictedly anticipates an end in which he will be all he ever could be' (1.66, italics added). Why these distinctions should necessarily be alternatives is never adequately explained. Their contrariety is far from obvious. It is clear, however, that in accord with a metaphysics of panentheistic historicism, eternity's transcendence of time is merely relative, not categorical. It is not unconditional but at once dependent and teleological. It is 'endless futurity': 'To be God is always to be open to and always to open a future, transgressing all past-imposed conditions' (1.216; cf. 2.146).[34] Even as they constitute one and the same history, divine being and creaturely being converge in one and the same *telos*, albeit in metaphysically different ways.

The triune God's eternity is temporal in more than just a teleological sense. Time's real distinctions serve to constitute each member of the trinity, even while the trinity nonetheless transcends those distinctions. 'The biblical God's eternity is not immunity to time', Jenson states, since eternity itself is not 'without inner reference to past or future' (1.210). Eternity's relation to time, in other words, is not that of metaphysical independence. Metaphysically, God is 'not . . . a perduring something' (1.222). Rather, precisely in his triunity, God is strongly temporal. 'What happens to the world with Jesus has three identities that are the origin of time, the goal of time, and what within time is what time is about; the three bracket time and occupy time and just so reach through time' (1.222). The Father, the Spirit, and the Son, in other words, strongly correlate with time's origin, time's goal, and time's meaning, because these very distinctions in some sense constitute the trinity. The metaphysical structure of the trinity 'is enabled by a difference between whence and whither, which one cannot finally refrain from calling ''past'' and ''future,'' and which is identical with the distinction between the Father and the Spirit' (2.35).

[34] Yet this temporal infinity is not merely an endless succession. It is 'neither time that goes on forever nor time's cancellation in a still point at the center of a temporal wheel. The triune God's infinity is rather the inexhaustibility of a particular event, the Advent of Christ . . .' (2.318). Jenson's 'inexhaustibility' thesis, which interprets the trinitarian teleology in a christological fashion, will be taken up in due course.

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'The biblical God's eternity is not the simple contradiction of time', because time itself is constitutive, though not exhaustive, of eternity (1.217). 'What [God] transcends is not the having of beginnings and goals and reconciliations, but any personal limitation in having them. What he transcends is any limit imposed on what he can be by what has been, except the limit of his personal self-identity and any limit imposed on his action by the availability of time' (1.217). Time's 'availability' for the self-constitution of the eternal trinity imposes no absolute limit on eternity as a finite infinity. Time's origin (the Father), goal (the Spirit), and redemptive sublation (Jesus as resurrected from death) metaphysically constitute a trinity whose futurity allows for real transcendence. 'The envelopment of our time by God is itself accomplished in the course of our time' (2.27). As in any standard panentheistic historicism, this envelopment does not unconditionally precede time, but depends strongly on the time it transcends.

Perichoresis as time's sublation

Finally, the eternity of the triune God is also supratemporal. Without being so, it would not be either temporal or teleological. The real temporal distinctions that constitute the triune *hypostases* are transcended in a supratemporal unity. This unity is the triune *perichoresis*, the real participation of each temporally rooted *hypostasis* in the others. 'Every work of God', writes Jenson, 'is begun by the Father, accomplished in the Son, and perfected in the Spirit and has its unity in their *perichoresis*' (2.300). Because of this *perichoresis*, 'nothing in God *recedes* into the past or *approaches* from the future' (2.35; cf. 1.217). What *perichoresis* makes possible is temporal duration without loss.

> The Father is the 'whence' of God's life; the Spirit is the 'whither' of God's life; and we may even say that the Son is that life's specious present. If, then, whence and whither do not fall apart in God's life, so that his duration is without loss, it is because origin and goal, whence and whither, are indomitably reconciled in the action and suffering of the Son. (1.219)

Note that (for Jenson) the supratemporal *perichoresis* is somehow constituted by the Son's historical action and suffering. Through a kind of Hegelian sublation (*Aufhebung*) the *perichoresis* incorporates Golgotha into itself, and only so is fully actual. In this 'Hegelian' (historically dependent) sense, God's eternity is his transcendence of death (1.72). 'The Father and the Spirit take the suffering of the creature who is the Son into the triune life and bring from it the final good of that creature, all other creatures, and of God. So and not otherwise the true God transcends suffering – whatever

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unknowingly might have been' (1.145).[35] The triune *perichoresis* is supratemporal only as it is rooted in history: 'The way in which the whence and whither of the divine life are one, the way in which the triune God is eternal, is by the events of Jesus' death and resurrection' (1.219). Resurrection, it seems, is the crucified Jesus' sublation into a new and supratemporal form of life. As such it becomes a constitutive element in the triune God's perichoretic unity.

Jesus' resurrection, the definitive event of perichoretic sublation, is at once unsurpassable, inexhaustible and paradigmatic for the human race. It establishes that the triune life in love can neither be exhausted nor surpassed. 'The temporal infinity of God is the unsurpassability of this event' (1.219). 'Eternity is the inexhaustibility of the Son's life' (ibid.), as his life finds its basis in the love that overcomes the cross.

> Father and Son are one God even as the Father abandons the Son, in that the Spirit who will raise Jesus had come in advance – as Spirit, anticipation is his being – and 'rested' on him from the moment of his dedication to his death, to be the bond of triune love also in abandonment. Just so, this abandonment and its suffering become integral to what the Spirit means for the Father and the Son, and so to the Love that is God. (1.191)[36]

> What happens among them accepts no boundaries; nothing can hinder what they enact. If we label the triune action 'love,' then we must say: the Father's love can embrace whatever the Spirit's coming brings; the Son's love can endure whatever his Father sends him to do; the Spirit's creativity of love is inexhaustible. Just so, this love is *God* and not creature. (1.216)

Although these passages are not without rhetorical power, their metaphysical underpinnings remain dubious. For they rest on the premise that 'the risen man Jesus . . . is constitutive of God's transcendence' (2.254). Among the several liabilities of this idea (to be discussed more fully in a moment), not the least is the threat of sheer monism. If a mere mortal attains metaphysical deity by way of sublation (in more traditional terms, if

[35] Here again, of course, the Hegelian proviso begs the question by presupposing that God strongly depends on the world – in this case, that the Son's action and suffering cannot be properly ascribed (through the incarnation) to a metaphysically independent God.

[36] In Jenson's discourse, sometimes it is the Spirit who raises Jesus from the dead, at other times it is the Father. The difference is merely rhetorical, since when everything is taken into account, they are thought to act conjointly in the event.

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the crucified Jesus is 'deified' by his resurrection), then it is hard to see how metaphysical deity can be denied to any other mere mortal for whom resurrection may also be in prospect. Conversely, if God's deity itself is somehow constituted by Jesus' resurrection (1.189), then it is not easy to see why this particular resurrection should be metaphysically unique, except in point of time. Can this Jesus-figure really serve as the dialectical pivot between time and eternity while still remaining unique in kind, with respect to his metaphysical deity over against other mortals who will also be raised from the dead (as opposed to his being merely the first among equals)? Why shouldn't the second person of the trinity finally be the *totus Christus*?

The *perichoresis* unifies Father, Spirit, and Son essentially through the sublation of death. The death of Jesus is sublated into eternal life. The hanged man of Golgotha is sublated into the metaphysical Son. More broadly, through Jesus' resurrection the very wound of time is sublated by a perichoretic deliverance. Time's wound is the burden of created time:

> The finitude of created time is constituted in the possibility of disruption; the burden of created time is constituted by the actuality thereof. Created time differs from God's time in that the extent of the specious present is uncontrollable, in that pieces of temporal reality can get away from us, in that the future can be merely threatening and the past fixed and dead. (2.345)

This burden (the alienation of past and future) is overcome by perichoretic event as it operates in the church's union with Christ.

> The church is one communion through time. The communion cannot be broken by time's discontinuities, particularly not by death, for it is founded in the eternal triune communion of God and is constituted in the Spirit who is the Power of eternal life. (2.267)

In the final state, the community's union with Christ 'will make their time congruent with the Trinity's time. Then the alienation of past and present from the future . . . will not obtain' (2.346). Instead everything will be caught up in 'the infinitely swift triune *perichoresis*' (ibid.). Death as time's dissolution will be no more, for 'death's destruction and the achieving of God's final reign are the same' (2.347). The triune *perichoresis* is the means by which time's wound is healed.

The supratemporality of *perichoresis* has implications not only for God's relation to time but also for his relation to space:

> The human person Jesus is actual just as the identity of God called the Son. That is, the human person Jesus occurs only within the perichoretic

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> event that is the triune God, as one identity of that event. And while the triune God does *not* simply transcend the temporal distinctions between origin, goal, and present reconciliation but rather their mutual alienation as lost past, unavailable future, and vanishing present, just so does he wholly transcend spatial distances. (2.253)

Only two places exist for God: 'the place that he is and the place he makes for creatures, immediately and inwardly adjacent to him. Thus the creation for God is just one place' (2.254). (Note that the 'immediacy' and 'inwardness' of the creation to God apparently describe a panentheistic relation.) Because the creation is only one place immediately over against God, God is simultaneously present to the whole creation (even if in many diverse ways) (1.204).

God's perichoretic unity *ad intra* and simultaneous presence *ad extra* have an important bearing on Jenson's Christology and so on his doctrine of the trinity. It is God's supratemporal unity in *perichoresis* in conjunction with his simultaneous presence to the world as a single location that underwrites, in some sense, the metaphysical idea, mentioned earlier, that Jesus' post-existence is really his pre-existence. Recall how Jenson insists that, in actuality, the Son enjoys no ontologically antecedent, unincarnate state. The Son thus enjoys no unconditional metaphysical independence from the world. Rather he depends on the world, and in particular on his resurrection from death, for his full actuality as the metaphysical Son. Three points are pertinent here. First, this metaphysical dependence on temporality is not mitigated by the ideas of supratemporal unity and simultaneous presence, not even when ontological priority is ascribed to the future. On the contrary, supratemporal unity, simultaneous presence, and ontological futurity all presuppose (for Jenson) this actual temporal dependence. Second, this form of dependence, especially its denial of the Son's full ontological antecedence, is precisely what gives Jenson's Christology its 'adoptionist' and 'Arian' features. Third, adoptionism and Arianism in Christology sponsor the expectation that subordinationism and perhaps tritheism will emerge in the corresponding doctrine of the trinity. That these are indeed the tendencies in Jenson's doctrine is what must now be explained.

Two denials: God as person and God as simple

From a traditional point of view, Jenson's idea of the trinity rests on two fatal moves. He denies that God is a person, and he denies that God is simple. The first denial would not be so fatal without the second, but in conjunction they lead inexorably toward subordinationism and tritheism.

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Moreover, when combined with the metaphysics of panentheistic historicism, and in particular with the idea of dialectical identity, they also lead (as mentioned) toward monism. Subordinationism, tritheism, and monism – these are the steep price of God's total Hegelian immersion.

In Jenson's trinitarian discourse, the word *God* functions more nearly as a predicate than as a subject. When ascribed to the trinity as such, *God* is merely a predicate (1.214). When ascribed to an acting subject, however, *God* does not refer to the trinity but solely to the Father (1.122, 220; 2.26). Although the triune God is 'personal' (1.123), 'God' as such is not really a single divine agent (1.222). Nor can God as such really be addressed in prayer. Only individual members of the trinity can be so addressed (1.119). When 'God' is addressed or spoken of in the singular, it is again only the Father who is in view. In Jenson's peculiar terminology, 'the Trinity is not an identity' (1.119). The only true 'identities' – in the sense of being acting subjects, agents or 'persons' – are the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. 'Were it otherwise,' Jenson argues, 'there would be four divine identities; the Trinity would then have to be taken for the ''real'' God, and we would be back with modalism' (1.119).[37] (Jenson, it seems fair to say, worries more about avoiding modalism than tritheism, though he wishes to avoid the latter as well.) Although he acknowledges that 'the Bible's language about God is drastically personal' (1.222), it is only with serious equivocation that he can speak of 'God' in the singular as a subject, whether that subject is grammatical or actual. 'God' is, for him, primarily an 'event' or a 'history' (1.221), hence 'personal' only in an adjectival or derivative sense (1.222–3), but never, strictly and properly, a God who as such can address us in the first person singular, or be addressed in the second person singular in return.

Despite its liabilities, this rejection of a single self-identical divine subject would still fall within the bounds of permissible trinitarian doctrine for the broad ecumenical church, were it not for a closely related move. It is Jenson's concomitant rejection of the idea of God as simple that makes his rejection of God as person so disastrous. It is also what separates him drastically from the standard patristic theologians of the ecumenical church – not only in the West, it must be observed, but also in the East. Jenson

[37] For a different solution to this problem – one that tries to do full justice to God's oneness as an acting subject without compromising the equally essential belief that the members of the trinity are acting subjects in themselves – see my essay '*Mysterium Trinitatis*', in George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 186–209, at pp. 189–97. This kind of solution is unavailable to Jenson because, as we will see, he systematically eschews paradoxical descriptions of the divine mystery.

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avoids acknowledging that divine simplicity is no less vital to the Cappadocians than to Augustine, even if in different ways.[38] The metaphysics of panentheistic historicism dictates that divine simplicity must be left completely behind. But this is finally an option for Hegel at the expense of Augustine – and of the Cappadocians.

The idea of divine simplicity has been, as he acknowledges, Jenson's 'old antagonist' throughout his theological career (1.169). It prowls through the tradition like a roaring lion, wreaking havoc wherever it rears its ugly head. It is the real culprit behind the ideas, so unacceptable to the Hegelian Jenson, of divine immutability, impassibility and timelessness. What is so striking about Jenson's polemic, however, is how crudely he draws his contrasts.[39] One would think that divine simplicity underwent no significant critical transformation at the hands of the Christian theologians who appropriated it – Augustine, for example, or the Cappadocians. For Jenson it is always merely a 'cultural' idea, wholly alien to the biblical God, of no redeemable hermeneutical value whatsoever. Yet it was largely through their use of divine simplicity that patristic theologians, East and West, were able to avoid the pitfalls of divine dependency (metaphysically) on the world, and thus, in their trinitarian doctrines, the pitfalls of subordinationism and tritheism.

Although he scores points against Augustine, Jenson does not give him credit for refashioning the idea of divine simplicity in conformance with the biblical depiction of God, as interpreted in the ecumenical tradition.[40] Not even Augustine thinks that God is simple, immutable and impassible in the crude sense that Jenson reproves (1.111–13).[41] Divine simplicity

[38] For a sobering critique of how Augustine has been misrepresented by modern systematic theologians (including Jenson), and for a plea against drawing false polar contrasts between 'Greek' and 'Latin' views of the trinity, see Michel René Barnes, 'Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology', *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), pp. 237–50.

[39] In *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), Jenson's discussion seems more nuanced, perhaps because, having more space, he can write in a less compressed fashion. See esp. pp. 103–48.

[40] For discussions of divine simplicity in Augustine, see Lewis Ayres, 'The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology', in *Augustine and His Critics* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 51–76; and Ayres, '"Remember That You Are Catholic" (serm. 52.2): Augustine on the Unity of the Triune God', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000), pp. 39–82.

[41] See, for example, the important discussion of divine simplicity in *De trinitate*, 6.1, 2. Divine simplicity is critically reconceived, according to the necessities of trinitarian doctrine, so as to include real multiplicity (and therefore love and life) within itself. See also, of course, *De trinitate* 7, where the real distinction of the three persons is explained with reference to divine simplicity.

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certainly functions for Augustine, as for patristic theology generally, to secure God's being from the pitfalls of metaphysical dependence on the world. To that extent it is coterminous with the 'timeless eternity' that Jenson so relentlessly condemns (i.e. an eternity not constituted by time metaphysically).[42] Nevertheless, for Augustine God's simplicity is, as Rowan Williams observes, not 'an abstract principle of unity . . . over and above the hypostases', but is, on the contrary, intrinsically relational and trinitarian.[43] Nor does Augustine's view place him, as Jenson insists, in serious conflict with the Cappadocians. For Augustine, Jenson maintains, the three persons (*hypostases*) possess the divine substance (*ousia*) *identically*, whereas for the Cappadocians, they possess it only *equally* (1.112). Read in a historically sensitive way, this would largely be a distinction without a difference, yet Jenson pushes it to mean that, for the Cappadocians, the unity of the Godhead is no more than a matter of mutual action (1.111, 113, 214). As an interpretation of the Cappadocians, however, this will not do.

The principle of divine simplicity was a commonplace in patristic theology, both East and West, discernible at least as early as Irenaeus.[44] As Lewis Ayres has pointed out, moreover, divine simplicity came to be seen, in part, as an entailment of the idea that the divine activity is one. A Western example of this reasoning may be found in Ambrose:

> If then the peace of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is one, the grace one, the love one and the communion one, the working is certainly one, and where the working is one, certainly the power cannot be divided nor the substance separated. . . . And not only is the

[42] Jenson is correct, in one sense, that for Augustine no 'necessary connection' exists between the immanent trinity and the economic trinity (1.112). Jenson contends that this is a great failure. For Augustine, however, the connection is not a *metaphysical* necessity – as it is for Jenson, with disastrous consequences. It is, rather, a connection grounded in solely the divine freedom. Otherwise, for Augustine, the connection is indeed 'necessary', because any suggestion that the immanent/economic distinction does not necessarily signify two distinct forms of one and the same God would be absurd. (I use the immanent/economic distinction here only as convenient shorthand.)

[43] Rowan Williams, '*Sapientia* and the Trinity: Reflections on the *De Trinitate*', in *Collectanea Augustiniana*, ed. B. Bruning et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), pp. 317–32, at p. 325.

[44] God is 'a simple, uncompounded Being, without diverse members': Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.13.3 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1987), p. 374. For Irenaeus as for the subsequent ecumenical tradition, divine simplicity was the presupposition, not the contradiction, of trinitarianism – regardless of any conceptual difficulties that may and did ensue.

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> operation of the Father, Son and Spirit everywhere one but also there is one and the same will, calling and giving of commands.[45]

Note that this argument runs in both directions. If the divine being is one, the operation is one; and if the operation is one, the being is one and indivisible. Ayres comments that it is important that we do not think of the link in trinitarianism between inseparable operation and divine simplicity 'as a peculiarly Latin phenomenon . . . It is a principle found in all the major orthodox Greek theologians of the later fourth and fifth centuries . . .'[46]

A few examples from the Cappadocians will serve to illustrate Ayres's point. Much like Ambrose in his reasoning, Gregory of Nyssa, too, was capable of inferring divine simplicity from the principle of inseparable operation:

> If . . . we understand that the operation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is one, differing or varying in nothing, the oneness of their nature must necessarily be inferred from the identity of their operation. . . . Thus the identity of operation in Father, Son and Holy Spirit shows plainly the undistinguishable character of their substance . . . As we say that the operation of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one, so we say that the Godhead is one.[47]

Almost identical reasoning may be found in Basil of Caesarea, in a passage that concludes: 'Identity of operation in the case of Father and of Son and of Holy Spirit clearly proves invariability of nature.'[48] Elsewhere Basil explains what he means by invariability of nature: 'The divine nature is simple, not composed of various parts . . . [God] does not increase by additions, but is always complete, self-established, and present everywhere . . . He is simple in being.'[49] Nor does Gregory of Nazianzen take an essentially different line: 'The three are a single whole in their Godhead and the single whole

[45] Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto* 1.12.131; 2.10.101. Quoted by Ayres, 'Fundamental Grammar', p. 56.

[46] Ayres, 'Fundamental Grammar', p. 56.

[47] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On the Holy Trinity', in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 328–9. Cited by Ayres, 'Fundamental Grammar', p. 74, n. 18.

[48] Basil of Caesarea, Letter 189 in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 231.

[49] kathara gar suntheseôs ê theia phusis . . . ou prosthêkais auxanomenon, alla plêres euthus, en eautoô idrumenon kai pantachou on . . . aploun tê ousia: Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 8.21; 9.22 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), pp. 41, 43.

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is three in its individual distinctions' (*Or.* 31.9).[50] 'Each of the Trinity is in entire unity . . . with the partnership, by identity of essence and power' (*Or.* 31.16).[51] 'We have one god, because there is a single Godhead. Though there are three objects of belief, they derive from the single whole and have reference to it. . . . The Godhead exists undivided in separate beings' (*Or.* 31.14).[52] Whatever may otherwise distinguish their trinitarian views, neither Augustine nor the Cappadocians conceive 'any sort of divinity prior to the persons and their relations of origin'.[53] Nor do any of them assert a doctrine of inseparable operations apart from a doctrine of divine simplicity.[54]

The trinity: subordinationist tendencies

By leaving divine simplicity behind in favor of metaphysical historicism, Jenson's doctrine of the trinity falls into serious problems. The first of these is subordinationism. In its standard versions, subordinationism ranks the Father above the Son and the Son above the Spirit. Jenson's ranking is different. Although he ranks the Father above the Son, he ranks the Spirit above the Father, so that the gradation runs, upwardly, from the Son to the Father to the Spirit. Roughly speaking, the Son represents finitude (death), the Father represents origination (creation), and the Spirit represents liberation (resurrection). In this succession the three persons of the trinity are unequal in power, dignity, and substance.

The Son is 'the sufferer of the Gospels' (1.144), 'the hanged man of Golgotha' (1.145). He endures what he has been sent to do (1.216), and in some sense accepts it (2.27). Enjoying no real pre-existence, however, he lacks all prior freedom to elect his role. His situation of being-towards-death is reminiscent of Heidegger's 'thrownness'. He is free only to embrace his assignment as a *fait accompli*.

Although the Father, in turn, enjoys far greater freedom than the Son, his freedom is also apparently finite. It is the freedom of origination (creation) and intention (election), but not the freedom of effectuation

[50] Cited according to the translation in Frederick W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzen* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), p. 283.

[51] Ibid., p. 287.

[52] Ibid., p. 286.

[53] Ayres, 'Fundamental Grammar', p. 74, n. 19.

[54] That for the Cappadocians the unity of the Godhead is not merely generic has been argued by both Prestige and, with exemplary discrimination, Hanson. See G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1936, 1952), pp. 229–35, 242–53; R. P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), pp. 676(737, esp. pp. 694–9, 734–7.

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(fulfillment). The Father can initiate, but lacking the power of the future, he *himself* cannot fulfill. 'The Father intends himself in the Son and intends all else by the way he intends the Son' (1.220). What the Father eternally intends is the risen Jesus (2.27) and the sublation of all things in him (2.26). He hands the Son over to death (1.65) and also breathes out the Spirit (1.123).

It is precisely the Spirit, however, who reveals the finitude of the Father and the Son. For 'the Spirit liberates the Father from himself' (1.158), or indeed 'from the limits of himself' (1.143), even as he also 'liberates Father and the Son to love each other' (1.156; cf. 1.161), as if they were somehow otherwise metaphysically incapable of a fully actual eternal love, as if they were somehow in bondage or prisoners of their metaphysical roles in the scheme of panentheistic historicism, as if the Father and the Son represent 'past-imposed conditions' that only their common Spirit can overcome (1.216). Only the Spirit can transcend these conditions, because only the Spirit is 'the Power of the divine future' (1.157). Only the Spirit properly possesses 'the Freedom that occurs in these relations' (1.161). '*Only* God's future is unlimited' (1.143, italics added), only the Spirit is God's future (1.160), therefore only the Spirit is '[God's] infinity' (ibid.). The doctrine of ontological futurity thus contains within itself the seeds of trinitarian subordinationism, because God 'is *primarily* future to himself and *only* thereupon past and present for himself' (1.217, italics added). The precedence of the future over past and present is the precedence of the infinite Spirit over the finitude of the Father and the Son.

In short, the power of the Son is finite, because the Son is a mere mortal, even though destined by the Father for resurrection into triune life. The power of the Father, though far greater, is also finite, because circumscribed as the power of the past in mere intentionality and origination. Only the power of the Spirit is infinite, because only the Spirit 'is the eschatological reality of God, the Power as which God is the active Goal of all things' (1.160), 'the Power of God's *own* and our future' (ibid.). Only the Spirit is God's 'temporal infinity', and therefore, only the Spirit, metaphysically, is 'God's deity' (1.216–17). The Father and the Son are not infinite by nature, but only as they participate in the endless futurity of the Spirit. Even so, what is infinite is not really they themselves, but only their 'life' and 'love' (1.216, 219; 2.319, 333).

The trinity: tritheistic tendencies

The second problem in Jenson's doctrine of the trinity is tritheism. Any trinitarian doctrine will tend toward tritheism insofar as the unity of the

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trinity is not substantial but merely volitional.[55] By eliminating the principle of divine simplicity in favor of metaphysical historicism, Jenson has only two ways left to account for the unity of God: narrative coherence and perichoretic mutuality. Neither of these is sufficient to avoid the suspicion of tritheism.

'Narrative coherence' means that there are three divine subjects in one coherent story. Like a story, states Jenson, 'God . . . is constituted by the outcome of narrated events' (1.66). The story has three poles: 'the origin of time, the goal of time, and what within time is what time is about' (1.222) – i.e. the Father (origin), the Spirit (goal) and the Son (purpose) (cf. 1.218). Within this story, these three are the '*personae dramatis dei*' (1.119), so that '[God's] hypostatic being . . . is constituted in *dramatic coherence*' (1.64) – no more, no less. 'The relations that appear in the biblical narrative between Father, Son, and Spirit are the truth about God himself' (1.150), which is to say, 'this narrative . . . is the final truth of God's own reality' (1.108). The point of the narrative is the metaphysical sublation of death, because 'from first to last of biblical faith, God is death's *opponent*' (*sin*, as usual, being conspicuous, in this context, by its absence) (1.66). Death is overcome in the narrative of the Son, who enters death (submission) for the sake of being delivered from it (sublation). The particular narrative by which triune life integrates into itself the Son's abandonment on the cross is precisely what constitutes 'God' and lends 'him' unity (1.65). 'The identity of the crucified Jesus and the risen Jesus is nothing other than the oneness of God' (1.200). Father, Son and Holy Spirit are therefore three 'poles' in a single story that forms the trinity's 'personal life' (1.123). Because the divine threeness is metaphysically strong (with three discrete agents aligned respectively with time's polarities), but their divine oneness is not, taking only the weaker form of 'narrative', it is not easy to see how this proposal can escape the suspicion of tritheism.

Without something like a principle of divine simplicity, the idea of perichoretic unity cannot dispel this suspicion. For Augustine and the Cappadocians, as we have seen, divine simplicity and inseparable operation went hand in hand. Identity of operation meant identity of substance, regardless of how that relation was variously worked out. Mutuality without simplicity, supratemporal unity without identity of substance, or, conversely – strong dependence on temporally constituted agencies as the presupposition of perichoresis – still arguably leaves us with divine three-

[55] For a similar line of argumentation about tritheism, see Brian Leftow, 'Anti Social Trinitarianism', in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 203–49.

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ness at the expense of divine oneness. It leaves us with a conception of divine unity as no more than mutual volition among three discrete agencies in a common narrative. The Nicene doctrine of *homoousia*, as developed by Athanasius and received by the ecumenical church, was substantive and not merely volitional.

From an ecumenical standpoint, therefore, it will not do when Jenson argues that three discrete persons 'make one united agency' (1.110), merely because they constitute one story, or because they are sublated from their temporal alienations into supratemporal unity. Nor will it do to equate divine nature with mutuality: 'That Christ has the divine *nature* means that he is one of the three whose *mutuality* is the divine life' (1.138, italics added). Without eternal identity of substance, it is far from clear how a finite Son, a metaphysically limited Father, and an infinite principle of futurity (the Spirit) can reasonably be said to constitute a '*singular* mutual work' (1.214, italics added). Their 'mutuality' is asymmetric, and it occurs only in strong dependence on the precedence of ontological futurity. The supratemporal sublation of their unequal contributions merely preserves their collective accomplishment without loss, once death has been transcended and overcome. It is good when Jenson affirms: 'Father, Son, and Spirit are fully and mutually *homoousios*' (1.116), but it is not clear how he can sustain the claim.

The trinity: monistic tendencies

The final problem with Jenson's trinitarianism is its tendency toward monism. This problem pertains to the principle of dialectical identity as it operates within metaphysical historicism. Since this problem has already been explored with respect to the Son as the dialectical pivot between time and eternity, what remains are only some larger ramifications. Recall the Wittgensteinian 'duck/rabbit' effect as it appeared in Jenson's conception of Christ's person. In Jenson's discussion of Christ, the Spirit, and the church, this 'duck/rabbit' effect tends to re-emerge, writ large. The logic of identity and difference leads to many strange conflations. Without the pressures of historicism and its dialectical logic, these conflations would readily disappear.

Without belaboring the point, a few examples may be adduced. They all exhibit a Hegelian logic of some sort, not that Jenson holds views that are identical with Hegel's, only that Hegel's presence in the background is unmistakable. A first move that looks monistic is the way that Jenson strangely conflates the church with the actual (metaphysical) body of the risen Christ. The assertion could hardly be stronger: 'The church is *ontologically* the risen Christ's human body' (2.213, italics added). The risen

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Christ, apparently, has no other body of his own. 'He needs no other body to be a risen man, body and soul' (1.206). The only real body he either has or needs is *identical* with the church and the eucharistic elements of bread and cup (1.204), a view, by the way, that Jenson actually ascribes to Paul (as if he, too, had read Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*). Moreover, the idea that 'the church with her sacraments is the body of the risen Christ' (2.214) logically entails that in some sense Christ's resurrection has yet to take place. 'There is even a sense in which Christ, *insofar* as his body the church is still an association also and not purely a community, possesses his risen body only in anticipation', writes Jenson. 'Thus the Lord's own resurrection awaits a future also' (2.347; cf. 2.181). In all this we may see a gesture to Hegel's idea that the Spirit is concretely actualized in the cultus of the religious community, except that the logical space Hegel assigned to the Spirit is now taken by Christ's risen body.[56] The church thus appears in two aspects. What from one point of view is a duck (a religious cultus), from another point of view is a rabbit (the risen body of Christ).

Another strange conflation suggesting monism is closely related. The church is equated not only with Christ's risen body, but also with his Ego. 'The church is the risen Christ's Ego' (2.215). 'Christ [finds] his Ego in a community of earthly creatures and [has] that community as his body' (2.254; cf. 2.131). What holds true at the level of community holds true also for the individual: 'The Christ who is *what* I am is the Christ who is *who* I am' (2.299). 'Thus', as Jenson cites favorably from another author, 'we may be called co-embodiments of Christ' (2.212). To say that the church presents Christ with his Ego means that it presents him with his own self-knowledge, and this, in turn, seems to mean that his communally based self-knowledge coincides with the very self-knowledge of God (2.131, 214–15, 303). Again we are reminded of Hegel; here too the place he allotted to the Spirit is reassigned to Christ.[57] Once more we have a double aspect. What from one point of view is the church's consciousness of itself is from another Christ's consciousness of himself.[58]

[56] 'The Spirit is . . . what is subjectively present and actual . . . only through this mediation [in the *cultus*] . . . This [is] the Spirit of God, or God as the present, actual Spirit, God dwelling in the community': G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 140.

[57] 'Finite consciousness knows God only to the extent that God knows himself in it; thus God is Spirit, indeed the Spirit of his community, i.e., of those who worship': ibid., vol. 3, p. 250 (W 1831).

[58] A closely related (and perhaps identical) idea is that the human spirit of the community is none other than the Spirit of God. 'The Spirit of this particular community is *identically* the Spirit of God' (2.182, italics added). 'It is the church's founding miracle that her

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Jenson's conception of the *totus Christus* is the epitome of these conflations. The question is acute: can the logic of his metaphysical commitments allow Christ and the church to remain properly distinct in the midst of their inseparable unity? As in the case of possible christological monophysitism, and for much the same reasons, the question is not easy to answer. Certainly Jenson intends no ultimate absorption. 'The church and risen Christ are one but can also be distinguished from each other . . . We may not so identify the risen Christ with the church as to be unable to refer distinctly to the one and then to the other' (2.213). Our personal identities in Christ will remain discrete. 'Nor are we to become identical with one another, or melt into one monadic superperson, even one named *totus Christus*. The redeemed life will be congruent with and moved by the divine life, and this is the mutual life of irreducible personal identities' (2.354). While the church will enter fully into the life of the triune communion, it will not dissolve into 'abstract divinity' (2.354).

Although these comments clearly rule out monism in any pantheistic sense, they do not necessarily rule it out in the more subtle sense of panentheism.[59] When it comes to how Christ and the church are related, the language of their being 'congruent with' one another would surely seem preferable to that of their being 'identical with' one another. Yet by using both idioms almost interchangeably, Jenson only contributes to the elusiveness of his stated position. While our 'deification' does not mean, he asserts, that our natures are *transformed* into deity (2.341), it does mean that we *participate* in 'God's own reality' in such a way that 'we come to be *identified* by *and with* events in the life of God' (1.71, italics added). At the end of all things, the love 'between the Father and the *totus Christus*' will not, apparently, be distinct from 'the love between the Father and the Son' (2.339). A 'duck/rabbit' effect seems plausibly to govern not only Christ and the church (1.85), but finally also God and the world. 'The final goal of creation is . . . at once God and his creature united in Christ, the *totus Christus*' (2.19). Wonderful as they are in themselves, neither of Jenson's

communal spirit is *identically* the Spirit that the personal God is and has' (2.181, italics added).

[59] 'Monists take different views about how many substances exist. Substantial monists, such as Spinoza, maintain that everything is part of a single substance. Attributive monists maintain that, although there may be many distinct substances, they are all attributes of one type of stuff'. From *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/m/monism.htm), ed. James Fieser. Cf. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 363. If Jenson espouses some version of Hegelian panentheism (as seems likely), it is not clear how he can avoid 'monism' in the attributive sense.

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two metaphors for this final goal – conversation and music (the great fugue) – necessarily excludes a panentheistic, and therefore monistic, reading of his position.

Again we may ask what difference it makes. The main reason why the risen Christ has no body but the church, and no Ego but the church, is to be found in metaphysical historicism. According to that scheme, eternity is not independent of the world. Eternity is not a perfection of God's being in and for itself. It constitutes no autonomous realm where Christ's body and Ego could subsist in their own right ('seated at the right hand of God', in the familiar language of the Creed). Consequently, crucial distinctions must be systematically blurred. As viewed from above, the risen Christ fuses with the church to form an overly homogenized *totus Christus*, even as through the *totus Christus* God finally fuses, in effect, with the world. As viewed from below, on the other hand, the *totus Christus* fuses (as we have seen) with the second person of the trinity, who, being nothing but a human creature elected for a special divine role, is not different by nature from the other human creatures who constitute the *totus Christus*. The risen Christ, as so conceived, can finally be no more than the first among equals. 'Deification', moreover, as a movement from below to above, seems logically, despite all good intentions, to fuse the world inexorably with God. The Hegelian absolute absorbs all things into itself, even if the persistence of internal differentiations is not entirely ruled out. At the heart of all these various fusions and dependencies is the conspicuous loss of a divine freedom that is properly robust. For the broad ecumenical tradition, God's simplicity serves logically to undergird God's sovereignty. By contrast, for metaphysical historicism, divine freedom is strongly conditioned, not to say compromised, by the world. When the trinity is baptized in the name of Hegel, subordinationism, tritheism, and monism are by no means easy to avoid.

Low tolerance for paradox

Ecumenical faith has always found it necessary to rest in formulations that are finally paradoxical. To take an example almost at random, consider this fifteenth-century poem called 'The Divine Paradox':

A God and yet a man?
A maid and yet a mother?
Wit wonders what wit can
Conceive this or the other.
A God, and can he die?
A dead man, can he live?
What wit can well reply?

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What reason reason give?
God, truth itself, does teach it;
Man's wit sinks too far under
By reason's power to reach it.
Believe and leave to wonder.[60]

These lyrics reflect the mainstream ecumenical tradition of theology that runs all the way, say, from Irenaeus to von Balthasar, Florovsky and Barth.

Jenson, by contrast, displays a remarkably low tolerance for paradox. Again and again, throughout his career, he has vilified paradox as a 'pious mystery-mongering of the vacuity'; by means of paradox, he believes, 'we communicate nothing whatever'.[61] As a means of describing divine mysteries, paradox is never valid, he insists, but 'always a danger sign' (2.67). This criticism, it seems, underlies Jenson's resort to rationalistic metaphysics. The ecumenical tradition, for its part, has at least two rejoinders. First, adequacy is a higher virtue than consistency; and second, the dream of reason produces monsters. The perfect divine being whom we cannot fully comprehend encounters fallen mortals with a perfect divine love which we cannot fully comprehend. Paradox, for the broad ecumenical tradition, demarcates that necessary boundary where comprehensibility must yield to a vastly greater incomprehensibility. When the blessed rage for order is pressed beyond permissible bounds, the results can only be theologically unfortunate. Jenson's alliances, witting or unwitting, with Socinus, Arius, and Hegel represent a vexed commitment to rationalism at the expense of the ecumenical tradition.

Conclusion

Up to this point, we might say, my essay has been both fair and unfair – fair, insofar as Jenson's glass is half-empty; unfair, insofar as it is half-full. Many virtues in Jenson's systematic theology have necessarily been neglected in order to explore the provocation of its most difficult confusions. Some virtues may at least be mentioned. Despite his closer definitions, Jenson does not deny that Christ died for our sins (2.333). Nor should his stress on Christ's real bodily resurrection be underestimated (1.196–7). His belief in the centrality of the eucharist and the indispensability of preaching puts him within hailing distance of those who believe that while the centrality belongs to preaching, the eucharist is indispensable. His *communio* ecclesiology has much to commend it. If Roman Catholic and Eastern

[60] Anonymous poem in *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 187. I have modernized the spelling.
[61] Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, p. 126.

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Orthodox authorities can accept his ingenious proposals about the office of ministry, the saints, Mary, and the papacy, Protestants will have little remaining reason to sacrifice unity for truth. Those inclined to demur from Jenson's neo-conservative political views should note two things: first, that as a left-wing neo-conservative he is capable of surprises; second, that it is not nothing to have someone on hand who is prepared, if need be, to spit in the eye of the Zeitgeist, come what may. His vision of the great consummation transcends, as does much else in his soteriology, the Hegelian straitjacket that constrains it. If the damaging metaphysics of dialectical historicism could be extracted from his theology, and Christ's atoning sacrifice reinstated, surely almost nothing would be left to be desired. That is the glory and the tragedy of this magnificent work.

In conclusion, we may note that Jenson's distinguished systematic theology stands in a line of succession. Over the past 40 years or so, some of the most creative minds in contemporary theology have engaged in a great and audacious thought experiment. They have tried to think through the implications of subordinating the doctrine of God to the doctrine of eschatology (rather than the other way around). Jenson's two-volume work brings this experiment to its worthy conclusion. He has carried it out more radically than Pannenberg, more rigorously than Moltmann, and more robustly than either Jüngel or Rahner. Now that it has been done, and done so brilliantly, perhaps it will not need to be done again.

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