

God's Triune Life: Engaging Thomas Joseph White's Recent Study

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*"Deus, ut nos in sobrietate contineat, parce de sua essentia disserit."*¹

At almost seven-hundred pages, Thomas Joseph White's book is an impressive achievement in size and scope, and one of the persons who endorsed the book, Rowan Williams, accurately describes it as "encyclopedic." There are repetitions in it, but these are not easy to avoid in a book that includes a number of surveys on some of the major thinkers in Christian theology.

The main thesis of the book is stated both clearly and forcefully by the author: sound Trinitarian theology must learn from Thomas Aquinas that, even if who God is as triune becomes known by human beings through the history of God's act toward and in the world, it is a mistake to elucidate God's own life from that history, since this would state things in the wrong order. It is the processions that ground the missions of the Son and the Spirit, not the other way round. What God does in history does not in any way constitute who God is in God's own life.² On the contrary, what God does in history,

¹ "God to keep us sober speaks sparingly of his essence"; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.13.1, trans. Ford Lewis Battle, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:121. This article was first presented as a communication. The oral style has been maintained.

² See for example: "The Trinity is not constituted by the mysteries of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, but is manifest to us in the mysteries in a preeminent way"; Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 16.

in the economy, is wholly derivative of who God is eternally.³ “The missions of the persons are the processions with an additional effect *ad extra* in the world.”⁴ We thus see the direction of the movement the author depicts for us: from God’s eternal act of generating both the Son and the Spirit to God’s involvement in and with the world. This means, conversely, that projecting back onto God some of the characteristics of God’s act in history is not theologically sound. It is much more adequate to see what God does as an outpouring of God’s own life.

To a large extent, this claim seems to be correct to me. Whether White fully abides by it is debatable, but I wish to inquire about something else, indeed about something that troubles me a bit. Is there not a risk of seeing the Passion narrative as an illustration or a manifestation of an eternal relation, a move which might result in some rather strange connotations? I am thinking here of a claim which is found near the end of the book: “The Son’s human self-offering to the Father is a most fitting temporal manifestation of the eternal relation of the Son to Father.”⁵ So, is the Son relating to the Father in an eternal gesture of “self-offering”? Is this how we should understand the relation between the Son and the Father? I wonder if we are not coming a bit too close to some well-known speculative waters, namely Barthian waters, in which it is suggested that there is an “above” and a “below” in God.⁶

Rather than tracing an upward movement, positing Jesus’s Passion as a reflection in time of a supposedly eternal relation that bears the same shape of “self-offering,” are we not invited by the Gospels themselves to focus instead on what God effects for the world in Jesus’s Passion? Is the “self-offering” the Scriptures presents before our eyes not the self-offering of both the Father and the Son, with the Spirit, in and for the world, rather than a self-offering within God from one to the other? Is it not more accurate to state, as White does near the end of the book, that, “in the mystery of the crucifixion, . . . we come to know who God the Trinity really is in himself”?⁷ Which then raises the (old) question of the direction or the aim of Jesus Christ’s “self-offering” on the Cross.

I have begun by highlighting one of the key theses of the book: sound Trinitarian theology moves from God’s eternal act of generating both the

³ See White, *Trinity*, 113: “The immaterial processions in God are the basis for what Western theology after Augustine will call temporal missions.”

⁴ White, *Trinity*, 643.

⁵ White, *Trinity*, 643.

⁶ See, e.g., Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part 1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 192–210.

⁷ White, *Trinity*, 643.

Son and the Spirit to God's involvement in and with the world, not the other way round. A number of other suggestions are of course made in the course of the seven-hundred pages of the book, but this I take to be the central thesis of the book.

To say that this is a bold move would be an understatement. As a result of this thesis, much of twentieth-century Christian theology is placed under the fire of White's trenchant critique, from a Thomist standpoint in which Trinitarian theology must focus on the distinction between processions and missions, and in this way remain in strong continuity with the patristic tradition, especially Greek and Latin, as he reads it (others read this tradition quite differently!).

Not much of twentieth-century Trinitarian theology remains standing, after the test has been conducted and completed! It is not just prominent Protestant thinkers such as Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Eberhard Jüngel who are deemed inadequate in their theological proposals. This triumvirate, which has exercised a deep and broad influence within and beyond Protestant theology since the 1960s, is critically assessed, to be sure, but the same is true of the two thinkers who almost single-handedly brought back Trinitarian theology from the margins to the center of theological reflection, namely Karl Barth and Karl Rahner.

In other words, much of recent Protestant theology is deemed inadequate. But Roman Catholic theology is not spared at all, as the inclusion of the name of Rahner suggests. And here something interesting occurs: whereas, in Roman Catholic circles, a battle used to be raging between disciples of Rahner and disciples of Hans Urs von Balthasar, here in White's book both Rahner and von Balthasar are seen as lacking or as misguided in some crucial respects.

Which leads one to ask: who, among recent scholars, might escape White's thoroughgoing critique? As in some many dystopian movies, TV series and books, one wonders: Will anyone make it? Will anyone survive? Or are we going to end up with a wholly desolate landscape?

No one escapes the author's critical eye and mind. But some do survive his critique. Who are these people who got things right? The answer is: serious scholars of Thomas Aquinas's writings, scholars who inspired White to advance the main arguments of his book: Gilles Emery, Bruce Marshall, and Dominic Legge are some of the scholars whose writings have helped White articulate his views.

And so White does have his "friends," and they happen to be contemporary, living theologians. But I would like to note that, even with the thinkers he disagrees with, at times quite strongly, White never ends up demeaning

their works. He recognizes the intention that motivated some of these thinkers. I have in mind here Moltmann's Trinitarian theology, which White assesses quite negatively, and yet White mentions what may have been Moltmann's intention as a German who (barely) survived World War II as a young man and as a soldier enrolled against his wishes.⁸ At the beginning of this book, White states that he has written these pages "in a spirit of collegiality and respect for vibrant alternative traditions; . . . theologians of different stripes participate in a broader theological culture marked by the shared love of the truth."⁹ This claim, in my view, finds a confirmation throughout the book. This is a real achievement, given the stark, trenchant nature of some of the author's main claims.

My comments come from a standpoint different from the Thomist tradition. As a Protestant who stands in the Reformed tradition, it is not the case for me, unlike White, that Aquinas's theology "can function as a sort of Greenwich time in Christian theology."¹⁰ But Greenwich time is useful only because there are other time zones. If there were not other time zones, no one would have any use for Greenwich time! And so I will raise some questions and ask whether Greenwich time might not benefit from the presence of other time zones. Greenwich time on its own may tend to become a bit lonely and dull. The liveliness of theology, as well as its meaningfulness, would we not all agree, depends on conversations *across* time zones, so that time zones that habitually view themselves as key and lone reference points may realize that they do need to hear questions, insights, and challenges that come from other, even very different, time zones.

The Question of "Correspondence"

In what follows I wish to raise several questions on central aspects of White's proposal. There is much I appreciated in the book, as for instance the measured approach to what he calls "proto-Trinitarian" aspects in the Old Testament, or the informative sections on the notion of "appropriations."¹¹ But I will now turn to some questions that came to me as I read the book.

⁸ See White, *Trinity*, 583n67: "Moltmann wants to posit a God who can suffer, in order to respond theologically to the great political evils of the twentieth century. Unintentionally, however, he transforms God after the Shoah into a God of 'infinite pain,' an unending Shoah." I am not certain Moltmann would agree with White's interpretation of his doctrine of God.

⁹ White, *Trinity*, 7.

¹⁰ White, *Trinity*, 10.

¹¹ White, *Trinity*, 62–64. We find "only intimations of Trinitarian revelation" in it (436).

First of all, and quite simply put, I wonder whether this proposal adequately corresponds to the tenor of the scriptural witness.¹² German scholars speak of theology as striving to be *sachgemäß*, that is, a theology that corresponds to the “subject matter,” the *res* which theology is called to consider always afresh. This I take to be the one true genuine test of any theology. How does this theology “correspond” to the scriptural witness?

Do not mistake this for a kind of low-level, unreasoned and unreasonable biblicism! This test has nothing to do with unfortunate claims about this or that theological term not having any legitimacy since it cannot be found in the Scriptures. I am not saying that sound Christian theology must speak using exclusively biblical language. And, even if I were saying this, in an attempt to safeguard “pure” theology from any philosophical “intrusion,” one could counter this strange—indeed ridiculous—claim by using some of the most philosophical sounding language that is indeed present within the Scriptures, such as when it speaks of becoming “partakers” of the “divine nature” (Θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως in 2 Pet 1:4) or of the “exact imprint of his being” (χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ in Heb. 1:3).

My point is different. The simple question I am inviting all of us to consider is this one: is it the case that the Scriptures, or better the “tenor” of Scripture, when speaking of God’s being and act, centers on the correlation between the processions and the missions?

The answer to this question, as I see it, is straightforwardly, unambiguously negative. Hence my problem with the central thesis of White’s book. In my opinion, the center of our theological construals should correspond, as best we can, to the center of the scriptural witness.¹³ I do not consider such

¹² See Calvin’s warning in *Inst.* I.13.21: “Here, indeed, if anywhere in the secret mysteries of Scripture, we ought to play the philosopher soberly and with great moderation; let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends” (Battles trans. [see note 1], 1:1461; quoted in E. P. Meijering, *Calvin wider die Neugierde: Ein Beitrag zum Vergleich zwischen reformatorischem und patristischem Denken* [Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: B. de Graaf, 1980], 16n71).

¹³ Khaled Anatolios writes: “It is by no means the case . . . that our conceptions of divine being must rely on propositional statements in Scripture that directly refer to God’s being *in se* from God’s relation to creation. Such statements are relatively few, and even those not meant to be taken in isolation from the overarching scriptural concern for narrating the history of God’s relation to humanity. Taken as a whole, the Scriptures are not intended to communicate metaphysical truths about God *in se*, as abstracted from God’s relation to us, nor do they speak of God’s relation to us in a way that agnostically prescind from the self-standing identity of this God” (*Deification through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020], 192–93).

a correspondence something that can be achieved or secured, a “standpoint” upon which one may rest. It is, rather, an *aim* one should strive to pursue as one attempts to keep one’s eyes on the *Sache* of Christian theology, for this *Sache* is not an object; it is not static, for it is a living reality, a reality which is itself always moving (like the well-known image of painting the “bird in flight”¹⁴) and always making everything else move.

I wish I recognized in White’s book the “center of gravity” of the Scriptures themselves when they point toward God, but unfortunately I do not quite recognize it. As I see it, the Scriptures do not ground a doctrine of the triune God that centers on the processions as anchoring the missions. I am also not convinced that patristic theology, seen as a whole, goes in this direction, and so I am not so sure about the extent of the continuity between Aquinas and the Fathers. White shows, for instance, how Irenaeus favored what White calls “economic trinitarianism,” in which “the Son and Spirit are distinguished clearly from the Father as personal agents who are God, but who are also described in their divine agency principally in reference to their economic state.”¹⁵ “While [Irenaeus] also affirms a pre-existence of distinction in God of the Father, Son, and Spirit, he does not develop an overt theory of how the relations of the persons exist prior to or in distinction from the activity of God in the economy.”¹⁶ Maybe Christian theology would do well to remain within the bounds of what Irenaeus took to be the matter of theology? White also mentions a recent text coined by the North American Orthodox–Catholic Theological Consultation in which we read that, at least in the case of the Latin Fathers, “none of these writers . . . makes the Spirit’s mode of origin the object of special reflection.”¹⁷ Well, again, I wonder if that is not a sound approach to Trinitarian theology. In addition, John Behr, following Williams’s own formulation of the Christological question, has recently stressed that something goes awry when one makes the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth “an episode of the biography of the Word,” and when attention is paid to a large extent to “the pre-incarnate” or the “pre-existent” Word. Who is the subject of the second article of the creeds? Is it the “pre-incarnate Word,” or is it the Lord Jesus Christ?¹⁸ One final indication that something may be amiss when one

¹⁴ Karl Barth, “The Christian in Society” (1919), in *The Word of God and Theology*, ed. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 42.

¹⁵ White, *Trinity*, 114. Meijering sees a deep similitude between Irenaeus and Calvin with regard to speculations concerning God’s essence (*Calvin wider die Neugierde*, 37).

¹⁶ White, *Trinity*, 118.

¹⁷ White, *Trinity*, 490.

¹⁸ John Behr, *John the Theologian and his Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford:

sees the center of gravity of Trinitarian theology in the correlation between processions and missions is the fact, which White mentions (or admits), that the Cappadocians “do not articulate a very developed theory as to how the two [i.e., Son and Spirit] relate to one another eternally.”¹⁹ As I read these words, I could not help but think to myself: “That is sound and good—that is indeed how it should be in Christian theology!” As I see it, it should not be possible, it is not desirable or adequate (*sachgemäß*) in Christian theology, to write a chapter on “God the Son” without ever mentioning the name “Jesus of Nazareth” or “Jesus Christ”!²⁰ How is this possible if, as White suggests near the end of the book, the crucified Jesus, when he is being taken down from the Cross, is in fact “the dead body of God, . . . the eternal Word”?²¹ This should not be (or become) the “Greenwich time” of Christian theology!

My sense is that the Fathers were correct to locate the heart of Christian theology not in the processions as the ground of the missions, but instead in the missions themselves, without losing sight of what grounds them in God's triune life, to be sure, but without dwelling too long on it, so that we may focus on the heart of the Gospel, which is the Passion narrative, as well as the ministry of Jesus, as the One God sends in the power of the Spirit. Behr puts it this way: “The cross . . . is the lens for bringing into focus the revelation of God in Christ, ‘the God revealed through the cross.’ We cannot, for Gregory [of Nyssa], begin with an understanding of God, or the Son of God in whom God is revealed, apart from the cross. If we attempt to theologize apart from the cross, to see God revealed in Christ apart from the Passion (after which we no longer know him in the flesh), we will end up defining divinity in human terms.”²²

This is probably the main point of contention or of discussion I wish to express. A greater correspondence between our theological construals and the Scriptures would be achieved if we were to center our doctrine of God's triune being and act on the missions themselves, with an eye certainly also

Oxford University Press, 2019), 23; see also 3, 22, 29–30, 323. On the expression “pre-incarnate Word,” which appears to be absent from patristic literature, see 22–23. Later in his book, Behr makes the following, significant claim: “Rather than a narrative beginning with a figure called the Word who later on becomes Jesus Christ, the Prologue . . . is, . . . in some sense at least, a hymn about Jesus Christ, speaking about him and his work in various ways” (252).

¹⁹ White, *Trinity*, 151.

²⁰ White, “God the Son,” in *Trinity*, 471–80.

²¹ White, *Trinity*, 649. Would it not be more accurate to say, at the close of a long study on the triune God, that the disciples, when they take him down from the Cross, are touching “the dead body of the Lord” or “of the Son” (rather than “of God”?).

²² Behr, *John the Theologian and his Paschal Gospel*, 27.

in the direction of the processions, since modalism is certainly not the way to go, but without seeing the processions as an equally weighty and central locus alongside the missions. It is not the case, I would claim, that the processions and the missions are similar to an ellipse with two foci (to use an image cherished by Albrecht Ritschl at the beginning of the third volume of his influential *Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*²³). The Scriptures only hint here and there at God's inner life, and as I recall, the Fathers were reluctant to plumb the depths of the "processions" of the Word and Spirit; they often expressed a sense of reaching the limits of what can be thought and said of God when addressing this topic.

Discussing the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father in relation to the Fourth Gospel, White writes: "As we can see, Jesus is presented here in John's Gospel as *coming forth* from God the Father. This coming forth, however, must be held in the first instance to refer to his eternal procession from the Father, which then serves as the intra-divine foundation for his temporal mission. Why must this be the case? Because the one who comes forth in time is eternally from the Father as his Son, as one who is begotten by him from all eternity, and as the Word who proceeds from him."²⁴ But is this interpretation not far-fetched? Is it really possible to read the Son's eternal generation in the Johannine text under discussion here? Why this need or this urge to move as systematically as possible from the missions to the processions?

The call not to embark on speculations concerning God's essence and inner life, to refrain from *vana* or *otiosa curiositas*, is not a modern call, issued by Kant and other philosophers who posited a sort of dualism between the *phenomena* and the *noumena*. It is a call that was frequently issued by the Church Fathers themselves. The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century sought to imitate them in that regard. Discussing Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy*, John Calvin writes: "If you read that book, you would think someone fallen from heaven recounted, not what he had learned, but what he had seen with his own eyes. Yet Paul, who had been caught up beyond the third heaven, not only said nothing about it, but also testified that it is unlawful for anyone to speak of the secret things that he has seen."²⁵

Is it not the case that the Fathers too were cautious about speculating?

²³ Albrecht Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 4th ed. (Bonn: A. Marcus, 1895), 11.

²⁴ White, *Trinity*, 104.

²⁵ Calvin, *Inst.* I.14.4 (Battles trans., 164–65; trans. revised). See Gunther Bös, *Curiositas: Die Rezeption eines antiken Begriffes durch christliche Autoren bis Thomas Aquin* (Paderborn and Zurich: Schöningh, 1995), and Meijering, *Calvin wider die Neugierde*.

The editors of Augustine's *De trinitate* in French note that, when Augustine discusses the procession of the Holy Spirit—something Augustine does at several junctures in his major treatise on the Trinity—he remains in close contact with the Scriptures, with what the Scriptures say of the missions of the Spirit, of the Spirit's names, and so on.²⁶ Augustine thus acknowledges the fact that the Scriptures do not say much at all on the themes of generation and procession, or on the relation and the difference between the two with regard to their origin in the Father. Indeed, Augustine, when articulating something in relation to the procession of the Spirit, immediately adds: "explicare quis potest?"²⁷ Augustine admits that it is difficult to say why both the *Verbum* and the *Spiritus* were not engendered.²⁸ Elsewhere in his treatise, he qualifies the question of the distinction between the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit as *difficillimum*, "most difficult," the superlative of the Latin word *difficilis*.²⁹ Augustine writes a bit later: "Sed ad hoc dilucide perspicueque cernendum, non potes ibi aciem figere; scio, non potes" — "But to see this clearly, lucidly, you cannot set your sight; I know, you cannot."³⁰ And after mentioning the three faculties within the human person in which Augustine sees a reflection of the image of the Trinity, he adds that, indeed, he was somehow able to distinguish this, but he remains utterly unable to explain adequately what, among the clouds of bodily images that create a sort of screen before our human mind, "one merely glimpses at."³¹

In other words, reading Augustin's treatise, one sees repeatedly how *tentative* and *cautious* his thinking and writing is. The difficulty is not expressed just once, at the beginning or in the middle or at the end, but again and again, at key moments. To think about the difference between the generation of the Son and the spiration of the Spirit may be among the most difficult speculative topics in Christian theology. And yet, reading White, one does not sense that this is so difficult, that it is *difficillimum*. Could this be because

²⁶ See E. Hendriks, "Introduction," in *La Trinité*, Bibliothèque augustinienne 15 (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1955), 55: "In his *De Trinitate*, Augustine often returns, at times in detail, on this aspect of the mystery of the Trinity. More than ever he remains in close contact with the Scriptures, with what they reveal of the Holy Spirit, of the Spirit's missions and proper names."

²⁷ Augustine, *Contra Maximinum* 2.14.1. See also his *Contra Sermonem Arianorum* 23.19 and Hendriks, "Introduction," 57.

²⁸ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 9.12.17, in *On the Trinity, Books 8–15*, trans. Stephen McKenna, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 38).

²⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15.26.47 (McKenna trans. [see note 28], 218–19).

³⁰ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15.27.50 (McKenna trans., 222).

³¹ See Augustine, *De trin.* 15,27,50.

Aquinas has paved the way on this point of doctrine, and that he may have paved the way for a kind of theological discourse which, despite its apophatic moments, is less inclined to acknowledge the difficulty of certain questions? Augustine shows us what the process of thinking theologically may look like, combining a clear acknowledgement of the difficulty of the task linked with a never ending quest, a never ending labor aiming at understanding the matter in still greater depths. The recognition of the extreme difficulty never leads to resignation, in Augustine's case. On the contrary, it seems to energize and kindle always anew his desire to understand. There is a theological style here, not afraid of using the first person, candid about the limits of what can be known by us, that still deserves to be emulated.

One final remark in connection with this question of "speculation": what is the role of theology in relation to the Scriptures? Is it to draw from the texts and then go somewhere else, as we ponder the matters we are being presented with? Or is it not, rather, drawing from them, certainly, but mainly in order to be able to return to them again and again in order to discover in them and through them the very presence of grace? Here too I am thinking of Calvin's remarks in the opening sections of his *Institutes*: "It has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling."³² Theology, here, is conceived as a discourse which aims at unlocking the Scriptures and at facilitating access to the Scriptures. It aims at a sort of "reduction"—in the etymological sense of the term—to the Bible, rather than as a taking flight away from it.

Not Just Protology, but Teleology

Reading White's book, I was struck by the recurring claim that the distinctions between the three persons have to do with their relations of origin.³³ This is a well-known, traditional claim. But is it true?

³² Calvin, "To the Reader," in *Inst.* (Battles trans. [note 1], 1:4; quoted in Meijering, *Calvin wider die Neugierde*, 20n89).

³³ White, *Trinity*, 410: "The persons of the Trinity are truly one in being and essence, and consequently they can be distinguished from one another only in virtue of their relations of origin." See also 425: "What differentiate the persons . . . are precisely their relations of origin with respect to one another." Or also: "Distinguishing the persons according to their relations of origin, which are manifest or instantiated in the processions, . . . is the unique way to distinguish the persons. The Son is eternally distinct from the Father because he proceeds from the Father, originating from him as his eternal Word. The Spirit is eternally distinct from the Father and the Son because he proceeds

Should we not also take into consideration the *aim* of God's triune life and of the entire "economy"? Would perhaps some distinctions between the Father, between the Son and the Holy Spirit, not be discerned in relation to the *telos* of revelation?

The fact is that the *telos* of revelation appears quite clearly in the sections of the book where the themes of the Incarnation and the Cross are front and center. For instance, one reads this sentence in the chapter on the crucifixion and resurrection: "From the Cross, Jesus acts as both God and man to redeem the human race, to forgive sins, communicate divine grace, establish the Church, and initiate the eschaton."³⁴

But elsewhere in the book, in the greater number of chapters, this *telos* more or less disappears from the view. Or at least it is not sufficiently visible.³⁵ Or, when it does appear, it is in relation with the Spirit as "the ultimate moment in the economy of the revelation of the Trinitarian life of God," which is not quite the same thing as the specific, eschatological role of the Spirit.³⁶

In his treatise on the Holy Spirit, Basil of Caesarea presents the role of the Spirit as the *perfecting* of God's ways with the world. The Spirit appears to have a non-exclusive, albeit specific, role in relation to the finality of God's ways. This teleological dimension, however, is barely mentioned in White's book. Are the strong eschatological, and thus teleological, overtones of the Cappadocians' pneumatology missed in White's account, even as certain claims seem to indicate the finality of the Spirit's work?³⁷ Would the Apostle Paul's claim in 1 Cor 15:28, on the Son putting "all things" under the Father, "so that God be all in all," not suggest a distinction between the persons not

from the Father and the Son as their spirated Love" (434). See also: "There is no way to distinguish the persons of the Son and the Spirit other than by relations of origin" (494). In the conclusion, however, one finds a different formulation: "A distinction of persons in God arises chiefly from *relations of origins*" (668).

³⁴ White, *Trinity*, 642.

³⁵ Among the pages where this conjunction of pneumatology and eschatology appears, see this, in relation to Rahner: "The gift of the Spirit . . . discloses God the Trinity as the eschatological future of the world, and the final purpose or essence of history" (White, *Trinity*, 568). Emmanuel Durand concludes his book on perichoresis with a strong eschatological note (*La périchorèse des personnes divines: Immanence mutuelle. Réciprocité et communion* [Paris: Cerf, 2005], 396).

³⁶ White, *Trinity*, 662.

³⁷ See, e.g., White, *Trinity*, 152: "The Father acts in creation as the paternal font of his Word and Spirit. He acts through his Word and his Spirit. The Word acts as the Word of the Father, as he through whom all things are made, as they are fashioned in the Wisdom of God. The Spirit acts as the one who proceeds from the Father and is the Father's Spirit of holiness, sent upon the world *to communicate eternal life to the world*" (emphasis mine).

just with regard to origin, but also to finality (not to mention the various aspects of the economy as a whole)?

To take an example: White does not pick up on the eschatological dimension of the Spirit's work in the quote from what Giulio Maspero has called "the apex" of Gregory of Nyssa's *Ad Ablabius*: "Every operation which extends from God to the Creation, and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and *is perfected* in the Holy Spirit."³⁸

The Cappadocians invite us to consider the work of God as having a primal source, an embodied mediator, and a perfecting agent, not in strict sequence, to be sure, as in some kind of modalist model, but nevertheless with distinctive roles within the divine economy.

White is not entirely oblivious to this teleological dimension.³⁹ But what is clearly emphasized in the writings of the Cappadocians seems to be almost invisible or insignificant in White's proposal. And when the teleological aspect is taken into account, it is mostly to stress the final *reditus* of creation as a whole toward the Creator, rather than as the communion of creation with God as well as with itself (as in the stunning prophetic vision of the wolf living with the lamb in Isa 11:6 and 65:25), or the descent of the New Jerusalem in this world.⁴⁰ If the overall aim of God's act is "communion," or "unity," and if the Spirit is the bond (*vinculum*; συνδετικόν) of love and unity within God, does it not become important to ponder this same unifying act of the Spirit in relation to creation too, and so in the course of history? Does the Spirit not eternally enact communion not just within God, but also with

³⁸ Quoted in White, *Trinity*, 152. On this treatise by Gregory of Nyssa, see Giulio Maspero, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa's Ad Ablabium* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); on the emphasis on the role of the Spirit in relation to the finality of all God's ways, see esp. 194–95 (on this passage as the "apex of the treatise" [195]).

³⁹ See White, *Trinity*, 461: "Up until this point, we have for the most part approached the mystery of the persons through relations of origin, and therefore as relative processions from an origin in the Father, for the Son, and from the Father and the Son, for the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the analogy from final causality, or perfections of life, is also helpful for our understanding of the Trinitarian relations, the divine persons, and also the *reditus*, or return of the creatures to God." And again: "The Son comes into the world to send the Spirit of his Father upon the creation, and the creation is perfected when all things participate in the life of the Spirit. The Spirit perfects the creation by elevating all things into communion with Christ" (463); "This 'Christocentrism' of the work of the Spirit serves to deliver all things to the Father in Christ" (464). The Spirit is "the final cause or purpose of creation" (524).

⁴⁰ White, *Trinity*, 461–62: "In the perfect life of the Trinity, . . . all things come from the Father, but they also in a certain sense return to him, in virtue of the interpersonal communion of the three persons."

God's creation? Just as we should be careful not to present Jesus Christ's ministry of reconciliation as an "episode of the biography of the Word," we should arguably not present God's creative act as an "episode" of God's life. Why? Because we would subtly and mistakenly introduce an inadequate notion of "freedom" (in the present case, divine freedom) in God, as if God could have opted not to create the world, as if God's freedom amounts to the possibility of doing *x* instead of doing *y*, or of refraining altogether from doing *x* or *y*.⁴¹ Needless to say, this would be a severely truncated understanding of divine freedom!

Despite the main intention to correlate processions and missions, I see a certain divine "incurvature" in White's view of Trinitarian life: "The proceeding persons are also always turned 'toward' the Father, are 'for' him."⁴² The three persons are said to be "mysteriously wholly interior to one another, in a perfect and pure interiority."⁴³

I wonder whether Andrei Rublev, with his famous icon, does not point in a different, and better, direction, with the three not looking at one another as in a closed, "perfect and pure" circle, but instead with the one on the right-hand side looking in the direction not of the other two, not looking back at them, but looking at the cup that stands at the center. Rublev meaningfully signals the direction of the divine *excurvature*, which is the very point of God's own life as self-donation, as a life that ineluctably wishes to share itself with others. God is *excurvatus in se*! It is not just Jesus Christ who, in the form of God, did not consider this as "something to be exploited" or "grasped," as ἀρπαγμὸν (Phil 2:6). It is also and primarily God as triune life who did not consider God's life in fullness to be something to be preserved in its "purity" and "perfection," but rather as something to be given, to be poured out and shared. This is one of the key affirmations of the Scriptures about God as manifested in God's Word and in God's Spirit, as seen in Isa 55, in Ezek 37, and in so many other biblical passages.

This *excurvature* is expressed by Williams in his recent article in conversation with Khaled Anatolios's 2020 *Deification through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation*:

⁴¹ This of course is a critique of Barth's recurring claim that God, in God's plenitude or fullness, could very well not have created the world, as well as a critique of modern Barthians, such as Paul D. Molnar and George Hunsinger, who are adamantly defending God's "freedom" as a freedom from any external or internal necessity.

⁴² White, *Trinity*, 461.

⁴³ White, *Trinity*, 464.

One aspect of what the Father gives the Son is precisely the capacity to bestow divine life in his own self-outpouring, not only to give back to the Father what has been given, in a mechanical symmetry. The Father bestows on the Son the Father's own abundance of bestowing; or in the language of the tradition, the Father both "breathes out" the Spirit and equips the Word to "breathe" it in turn. So, in relation to creation, the Word exercises a generative power appropriate to a being that is itself already generated, and the Spirit is active and free to unite all the created fruit of the Word's "generated generativity" to the Source.⁴⁴

There is, according to Williams, a "timeless circulation of an overflowing eternal love and intelligence never contained in any kind of closed reciprocity."⁴⁵ This is an aspect that is somewhat marginal in White's book. When commenting on Gal 4:6–7 ("And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our heart, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God"), on the gift of adoption, of being made into God's own sons and daughters, White could have used this as an occasion to show how the eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ is, from the start, opened and aimed at a much broader, inclusive sonship and daughtership in which sons and daughters do not merely relate back to God, but also to one another in and through God.⁴⁶ And in this way one would find himself closely aligned with Gregory of Nyssa, according to whom, in Maspero's words, "the unity that awaits humanity at the end of time is the very Trinitarian unity itself, . . . realized by the third Person."⁴⁷

Given this pneumatological emphasis in the Cappadocians, it should not surprise us to see contemporary Orthodox theologians who are steeped in these writings stress the role of the Spirit in relation to the fulfillment of God's ways with the world. One example is Nikos Nissiotis's contribution, in which he makes it clear that the Holy Spirit plays a special role in bringing God's intention to completion.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Rowan Williams, "Deification and the Divine Image," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 25, no. 1 (2023): 4.

⁴⁵ Williams, "Deification and the Divine Image," 11.

⁴⁶ White, *Trinity*, 574. See also, crucially, John 17:22: "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one."

⁴⁷ Maspero, *Trinity and Man*, 195. Maspero adds: "The theological clarity that the Nyssian showed during the Council of Constantinople I permitted him to deepen the role of the third Person in the history of men in passage towards perfect identification with Christ" (198; Maspero here sees here a "connection between protology and eschatology").

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Nikos Nissiotis, "Pneumatologie orthodoxe," in *Le Saint-Esprit*, ed. Frantz

Final Remarks—The Outpouring of Triune Divine Life

In the final section of my paper, I would like to comment on the outpouring of God's life through God's Word and Spirit. As you have understood, I take this to be the heart of Christian theology, and so also the heart of Trinitarian doctrine.

Whenever White touches on this theme, I am suddenly more inclined to follow what he is articulating. For instance, I find what he writes about Jesus as the "eschatological emissary," as the "messianic emissary," to be excellent.⁴⁹ His comments on Jesus's baptism as "the occasion of an epiphany of the Father, who designates Jesus the Son of God, and of the Spirit," are also important and could be developed further.⁵⁰

As I have already suggested, in the book there is a very long eclipse of Jesus of Nazareth, of Jesus Christ, from the early section on the New Testament to the consideration of the topic of the Incarnation, near the end of the book. In these sections, early on and late in the book, I find claims that reflect the tenor of the four canonical Gospels, for instance when I read:

The action of Jesus in his historical life is Trinitarian in form. In his preaching, physical gestures (like walking or sleeping), in his prayer, and in his free acceptance of suffering and death, he reveals himself as one who is from the Father, sent into the world to redeem us. The paternity of the Father therefore overshadows all that Jesus is and does as man.⁵¹

But Jesus's relation to the Father has a horizon, and this horizon is related to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Jesus "carries out his mission in view of the communication of the Spirit, whose mission reflects the order of the processions."⁵²

Jesus's "mission" is carried out by the triune God. From this mission, rather than in abstraction from it, Christian theology could one day embark on a renewed reflection on the divine attributes, instead of deriving them from

Leenhardt et al. (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1963), 85–106. The Spirit is sent for this: "in order to bring to completion and to concretely establish between us and among us human beings the reality and presence of Christ" (92; trans. mine). Pentecost is God's "new work"; it is not a secondary event when compared to the redemption which is accomplished in Christ—it completes this event, being its *telos* as well as the beginning of the new eon of the permanent presence of Christ's revelation in history (93).

⁴⁹ White, *Trinity*, 71–72, 76.

⁵⁰ White, *Trinity*, 75.

⁵¹ White, *Trinity*, 625.

⁵² White, *Trinity*, 638.

the teaching on God's unity (*de deo uno*). This would be more in keeping with a *Christian* theology of the divine attributes. Presenting God's attributes without reference to Jesus Christ and to the Spirit is unsatisfactory, in my opinion. But this is precisely what happens around the middle of the book: suddenly Trinitarian discourse recedes and almost disappears. The reader wonders whether he still is reading a book about the Trinity. And so, an opportunity was missed, in a book on the triune God, to articulate a doctrine of the divine attributes in a Trinitarian perspective. Such a program might not be a Thomist program, but could a doctrine of the divine attributes not be Thomist *kata pneuma*—creatively conceived as such a doctrine, as a Trinitarian doctrine of the divine attributes on the basis of Aquinas's thought?

Toward the end of his book, White claims that "the judgment of God is a theandric act," for "when Jesus judges us, it is not only as God, nor merely as man, but only ever as both God and man."⁵³ This claim is much better than the many assertions one finds in the book that distinguish starkly Christ's human nature from his divine nature, thus underplaying Christ's identity as a single person, as a human being who is the Son of God. But if "the judgment of God is a theandric act," then is it not the case, as well, of God's justice? Can God's "judgment" be severed or abstracted from God's "justice" (understood as a divine "perfection" or "attribute")?⁵⁴

In 1898, Théodore de Régnon, a Jesuit, sought to show the "full community of faith that has always pertained between the Eastern and the Western churches; that being said, the methods of exposition and of the defense of dogma were somewhat different." He added: "It seemed to me that this diversity in language derived from a diversity of philosophical perspectives; the Greeks aiming first at the [divine] person, whereas the scholastics were aiming first at nature."⁵⁵

Whether de Régnon was correct in his assessment has been debated. But I wonder whether Latin theologians would not do well to listen carefully, with open ears and open hearts, to the Eastern tradition, so as not to reflect on *de deo uno* in abstraction from the triune divine life. This in turn might

⁵³ White, *Trinity*, 660.

⁵⁴ Moreover, White quotes John 5:22—"The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son" (660n45)—a claim which a Trinitarian approach to the divine attributes (here: divine justice and judgment) would consider closely.

⁵⁵ Théodore de Régnon, S.J., *Études de théologie positive sur la sainte Trinité*, vol. 3 (Paris: V. Retaux, 1898), 3. He here recalls addressing this in vol. 1, where he wrote: "I repeat it yet again: whereas the Latin approach immediately posits the unity of substance, the Greeks first posit three perfect subsistences; hence the necessity for the Greeks to reduce this triplicity to unity, and in this way to avoid remaining stuck on the path" (1:418; trans. mine).

help keep in our minds the theandric nature of the Son of God, which then completely modifies our very understanding of God's triune life, a life that is intrinsically and eternally open to creation, including human beings, turned toward creation. We can embrace "a speculative theological reflection on the mystery of God" as long as the "speculative" dimension implies close, enduring attention to the "speculum" of God's inner life that is Jesus Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). This theandric dimension of God's own life, if the Son is indeed the one whose name is Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, undercuts any dualistic vision that dissociates God's own life from creaturely life. And there one finds a key reason why the εὐαγγέλιον is indeed εὐ-αγγέλιον, a good news. N.V.