

Gathering Many Likenesses: Trinity and Kenosis

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TRADITIONALLY THE MYSTERY of the Trinity has consisted in the confession of the irreducible distinction, complete unity and equality, and reciprocity and mutual indwelling between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That the one God of Israel is revealed and acknowledged to be Father, Son, and Spirit stems from the Incarnation of the Son, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and their invisible missions of adoption and sanctification. A variety of arguments drawn from soteriology, revelation, liturgy, and the experience of the Church led to the confession that Father, Son, and Spirit are eternally distinct hypostases and not temporary masks or momentary activities of God. Instead, God eternally is who God is and has revealed himself to be in the economy: Father, Son, and Spirit. Similarly, arguments for the complete unity and equality of the persons were also drawn from several places: that the God of Israel is one; that creation, reconciliation, and glorification are equally the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit; that only God can reconcile and join us to God; and that only God can reveal God. That God is beyond all creaturely and finite contrasts, typically stated as a doctrine of divine simplicity or incompositeness, has helped to secure the oneness, unity, and equality of Father, Son, and Spirit by positing that each perfectly instantiates the one divine essence, that the divine essence is nothing other than the persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and that all of the divine perfections are entirely present within each person of the Trinity. Both the distinction of the persons and their consubstantial unity as the one God of Israel is expressed through the ideas of the eternal, ineffable, and incomprehensible generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit, with generation and procession understood as relations and activities entirely internal and immanent to the divine being

and life. Inasmuch as the persons are nothing other than their relations to one another, then their hypostatic character is given through their mutually constitutive and defining relations. And because he is the Father, the Father begets the Son and spirates the Spirit. The Son is the Son because he is engendered by the Father and the one upon whom the Spirit rests. The Spirit is the Spirit because he proceeds from the Father and rests upon the Son. Finally, the reciprocity and unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit has also been expressed at the level of the persons themselves through the doctrine of circumincession or *perichoresis*, which indicates the mutual indwelling and in-being of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Each is fully God and fully the divine essence, and so in the Father there is also the Son and Spirit, in the Son there is also the Father and Spirit, and in the Spirit there is also the Father and Son.¹

As for kenosis, the meaning of the verbs “emptied” and “humbled” (Phil 2:7, 8) and the question of their referent have been complicated issues. Does the “self-emptying” of verse 7 refer to an action of the eternal Son or to the willingness of the man Jesus to be obedient even until death?² If it is the eternal Son who empties himself, does kenosis mean an addition of the *forma servi* to the *forma dei*, the *krypsis* or hiding of the Son’s glory and majesty (as in antique and medieval theologies and the Tübingen Lutherans), or does it mean a divestment or surrender of the relative divine attributes or the divine self-consciousness itself as a necessary precondition for a genuine incarnation (as in modern kenoticism)? Conversely, if it is the man “Christ Jesus” who empties himself, does this emptying mean the voluntary non-use of certain divine perfections by the incarnate Son during his earthly career (as for the Giessen Lutherans), or does it instead characterize Jesus Christ’s humility and obedience, which the apostle Paul is exhorting all Christians to imitate as suggested by the complex nesting of the verbs of verses 7 and 8 in a hymn which itself is placed within this paranetic passage? None of these questions and issues have been definitively answered.

Given the technical and historically controverted nature of the idea of

¹ In the language of Thomas Aquinas, the Father is in the Son (and conversely) by essence, relation, and origin; *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 42, a. 5; see also session 11 of the Council of Florence.

² For historical and doctrinal background on kenosis, see: *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); David Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis Explored and Defended* (London: Student Christian Movement, 2011); Bruce McCormack, “Kenoticism in Modern Christology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 444–57.

kenosis, it might seem imprudent to broaden the range of kenosis beyond the eternal Son or the historical Jesus, and yet a variety of modern theologians have performed just this extension of kenosis into the doctrines of God and the divine attributes, creation and providence, revelation and Scripture, and anthropology and ethics. The doctrinal expansion of kenosis and its evocative resonances have contributed to the casual use of the adjective “kenotic” to mean a variety of things: self-giving, sacrificial self-giving, humility, divestment, self-limitation, accommodation or condescension, or God’s presence and work *sub contrario*. Perhaps the boldest extension of kenosis, however, has been its use to describe the relations amongst the persons of the Trinity. In what follows we will consider some of the prominent advocates for the idea of an inner-Trinitarian kenosis and then evaluate the prudence of describing the mystery of the Trinity in this way.

On Inner-Trinitarian Kenosis: Sergei Bulgakov and Hans Urs von Balthasar

The conjunction of kenosis and the Trinitarian relations was already attempted by the mediating theologian Karl Theodor Albert Liebner in his *Die christliche Dogmatik aus dem christologischen Princip dargestellt* (1849).³ For Liebner, that God is self-communicating and personal love means that the Trinitarian relations themselves are to be characterized in terms of love, understood not only as being for another, but moving beyond oneself, having oneself in another, and being had by another. The eternal and inner possibility of the Incarnation is thus the eternal self-emptying of the Son before the Father which is simultaneous with the Father’s filling up of the Son by the Spirit.⁴ Equally, the economic subordination of the Son is not grounded in Christ’s human nature, but in the eternal subordination of the Son, a subordination which is simultaneously posited (inasmuch the Father initiates the Triune life) and sublated in the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit. In this way, the Incarnation is the temporal enactment of the Father’s giving himself into the Son, the Son’s self-emptying before the Father to be filled with the Father by the Spirit, and the Spirit’s maintenance of the distinction and unity of the Father and the Son

³ Karl Theodor Albert Liebner, *Die christliche Dogmatik aus dem christologischen Princip dargestellt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1849), 150. For descriptions of Liebner’s views, see Alexander Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ, in Its Physical, Ethical, and Official Aspects* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1876), 449–53, and David R. Law, “Kenotic Christology,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, ed. David Fergusson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 251–79, esp. 258–60.

⁴ See Liebner, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 149–51.

and completion of the Trinity as love and life.⁵

It is, perhaps, Sergei Bulgakov who offers one of the most innovative and far-reaching expansions of kenosis. Bulgakov employs the terminology of kenosis in four different doctrines: in the characterization of the divine hypostases, in the creation and preservation of the world, in the Incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Spirit, and in the Paschal mystery.

In *Unfading Light* (1917) kenosis appears most frequently in discussions of the Absolute's free and loving "sacrifice" to create the world, to become relative to it, and to enter into it in love and humility.⁶ Creation itself is interpreted in terms of kenosis and the Cross, and in this way creation becomes a "creative sacrifice of love."⁷ With a reference to John 3:16–17, the Cross is read as God's ultimate purpose for creation, for "Golgotha was not only eternally pre-established at the creation of the world as an event in time, but it also constitutes the metaphysical essence of creation,"⁸ and the "general and primordial 'kenosis' of Divinity in the creation of the world pre-eternally included a concrete kenosis, the incarnation of the Son of God and the sacrifice on Golgotha."⁹ The Absolute remains Absolute in itself and yet in creating sacrifices its absoluteness as regards the Absolute's relation to the world: "The voluntary sacrifice of selfless love, the Golgotha of the Absolute, is the foundation of creation." Bulgakov is careful to distance himself from Schelling's idea that creation completes God or the Trinity,¹⁰ to insist upon God's immutable blessedness and fullness,¹¹ and to argue that there is no antagonism in the Trinity.¹² Kenosis is also used to characterize the divine persons and relations themselves. When elaborating the idea of Sophia as the love of the Triune love, Bulgakov states that "the life of the Trinity is a pre-eternal act of self-surrender, of self-exhaus-

⁵ Isaak Dörner's criticisms that Lieber cannot sufficiently distinguish between the Father and the Son thus seem off the mark (*System of Christian Doctrine*, vol. 1, trans. Alfred Cave [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005], 410–11). While more economically oriented as a gloss of 1 John 4:8–10, a similar argument for characterizing the Trinity in terms of love understood as self-surrender can be found in Eberhard Jüngel's *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 314–30.

⁶ See Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 181–214.

⁷ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 185.

⁸ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 185.

⁹ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 343.

¹⁰ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 201.

¹¹ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 195–96.

¹² Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 186.

tion of the Hypostases in divine love.”¹³

The idea of an inner-Trinitarian kenosis is clearly and extensively discussed in Bulgakov’s *The Lamb of God* (1933). The hypostases need to be described and imaged dynamically, as self-renouncing and self-moving love whereby self-affirmation and egocentricity are banished.¹⁴ The result is that paternity and active begetting become described as “the ecstasy of a going out of oneself, of a kind of self-emptying, which at the same time is a self-actualization,”¹⁵ that the Father’s “begetting is self-emptying, the giving of Himself and of His own to the Other; it is the sacrificial ecstasy of all-consuming jealous love for the other.”¹⁶ Additionally, the passive generation of the Son means that the Son is himself and finds himself in the Father, as the Father’s Son, Word, and Image such that “Sonhood is already kenosis.”¹⁷ The love of the Son for the Father is “sacrificial, self-renouncing humility,” and the Son “offers his personal selfhood in sacrifice to the Father” by being the Father’s Word.¹⁸ This eternal kenosis of the Son is the ground of the Incarnation.¹⁹ This sacrifice of one for the other is described as “pre-eternal suffering,” which does not contradict the divine beatitude, but serves as its foundation: “For this all-blessedness would be empty and unreal if it were not based on authentic sacrifice, on the reality of suffering. If God is love, He is also sacrifice, which manifests the victorious power of love and its joy only through suffering.”²⁰ This mutual suffering and sacrifice would be tragic were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the “joy of sacrificial love, the bliss and actualization of this love.”²¹ The reality and accomplishment of the love between the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reveals what the Son says of the Father, and through the Spirit, God becomes truth and beauty.²²

When Bulgakov considers Phil 2:6–8 (which he links to 2 Cor 8:9), he argues that self-emptying applies both to the eternal Son and to the man Jesus Christ, and in this way Christ’s earthly obedience is grounded in his heavenly obedience and “in the cross of the earthly path is realized

¹³ Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 218.

¹⁴ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 95.

¹⁵ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 98.

¹⁶ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 98.

¹⁷ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 99.

¹⁸ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 99.

¹⁹ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 177.

²⁰ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 99.

²¹ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 99.

²² Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 101.

the cross of the heavenly kenosis.”²³ The kenosis enacted in the Incarnation of the Son is considered in three aspects: nature, hypostasis, and the inner-Trinitarian life. In the Incarnation, the divine nature remains unchanged and undiminished while there is a temporary relinquishing of the divine glory (which Bulgakov takes to be the Son’s humiliation). The Son sets aside his own proper will and activity and retains his filial obedience, and “His proper hypostatic act with respect to Himself, His personal self-definition, is entirely exhausted by this self-emptying or self-abolition as it were.”²⁴ In the Incarnation, the Son’s hypostasis is “depersonalized” and manifested as a human hypostasis and in this way entirely belongs and is transparent to the Father by virtue of the Spirit’s resting upon him. Hypostatically considered, “the kenosis does not extend to the very *being* of the hypostasis of the Son, which is rooted in the inner, interhypostatic relationship of the Holy Trinity.”²⁵ The kenosis of the Son in the Incarnation also does not affect the Son’s participation in the Triune life, and so “the ‘immanent’ Trinity does not know the kenosis of the Word, which exists only in the ‘economic’ Trinity.”²⁶ The eternal Son or Logos also entirely remains himself and his participation in creation and providence is unaffected.

In *The Comforter* (1936), Bulgakov characterizes the divine hypostases in two registers, that of mutual revelation and that of mutual self-sacrificial love. As for the former, the Father is Father inasmuch as he “renounces”²⁷

²³ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 217.

²⁴ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 225.

²⁵ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 226.

²⁶ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 227. While the depersonalizing of the Son and his repersonalization as a human hypostasis resembles the kenoticism of Thomasius or Gess, Bulgakov differentiates himself from Gess when arguing that “the exclusion of the Son from the Holy Trinity during the time of kenosis is compromisingly absurd, since such a supposition would signify nothing other than the total self-abolition of the Second hypostasis (as well as of its kenosis)” (*Lamb of God*, 226). Or again, with reference to Gess, Bulgakov states: “Christ’s ascension signifies not the return of the Logos into the depths of the Holy Trinity, which he did not leave even in the state of kenosis, but the completion of the kenosis. . . . In the eternal and supramundane being of the Holy Trinity, where there can be no events and where there is no place for time, no change could occur” (*Lamb of God*, 404). See also Sergius Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, trans. Patrick Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke, and Xenia Braikevitch (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1993), 89–90. Likewise: “The kenosis of the Son after his descent from heaven, presupposes the removal of the Glory, not, certainly, in ‘heaven,’ in the ‘immanent’ Trinity, but in the world” (Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002], 397).

²⁷ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eer-

his fullness, proceeds outside of himself in begetting the Son, and reveals himself in the Son.²⁸ As begotten, the Son is the Word and Truth of the Father, lives out of the Father, proceeds out of himself back to the Father, and reveals the Father. The Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of Truth, of Love, and of the Life of the Father and Son, completes and accomplishes this mutual revelation.²⁹ As for the latter register, Bulgakov notes that “love *as such* and thus all the forms of love” consists in “sacrificial self-renunciation, for the axiom of *personal* love is that there is no love without sacrifice,”³⁰ and is the “reciprocity of a sacrifice without limit.”³¹ The relationship between Father and Son is a relation of mutual sacrifice and self-renunciation, expresses the necessary tragic moment of love, and is transformed and resolved into joy and bliss, for “there is no love without joy or bliss.”³² The Spirit undertakes its own “hypostatic self-abolition”³³ in that the Spirit also does not exist for and in himself, but for and in the Father and Son by being the love, life, and comfort of the Father and Son, and then also being self-love, self-life, and self-comfort.³⁴ Bulgakov notes that the characterization of the divine persons in terms of lover, beloved, and love itself was already present in Augustine, but that the inherent elements of love as sacrifice, tragedy, and the overcoming of tragedy were not present.³⁵

Hans Urs von Balthasar continues a number of the themes and judgments present in Bulgakov, albeit without his sophiology and with less extension across different doctrines,³⁶ and with the additional influences of Adrienne von Speyr, Karl Barth, Gustav Siewerth, and Ferdinand Ulrich. Explicitly following Bulgakov, von Balthasar argues that the loving and primordial “selflessness” of the divine persons is the basis both of the first kenosis of creation, especially the creation of free creatures and of

mans, 2004), 63.

²⁸ Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 63.

²⁹ With the overtones of Schelling (Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 69–72).

³⁰ Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 65.

³¹ Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 66.

³² Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 66.

³³ Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 181.

³⁴ Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 181.

³⁵ Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 181.

³⁶ He states as much in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 35. On the relation between Bulgakov and von Balthasar more generally, see Gerard F. O’Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11–42, and Jennifer Newsome Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

the “second and truest kenosis” of Jesus’s death on the Cross.³⁷ Kenosis should not be taken as a necessity of the inner divine life or as universal law, but once kenosis is seen in the Cross, then one can surmise that God’s “self-abasement and self-emptying” in Christ “were no contradiction of his own essence, but corresponded precisely to this essence, in a way that could never have been thought of.”³⁸ In the light of what God has done in the economy, kenosis becomes a legitimate, authorized, and illuminating way of understanding the divine processions, relations, and missions.³⁹ In addition to his inheritance from Bulgakov, von Balthasar explicitly follows and expands Barth’s arguments that Jesus Christ’s two states of humiliation and exaltation should be taken as a simultaneous humiliation of God and exaltation of humanity and that the eternal Son is defined by hypostatic obedience and humility.⁴⁰ Von Balthasar realizes that his own Trinitarian theology is moving beyond Barth, as when he elsewhere notes that Barth is reticent about the divine processions,⁴¹ and when he calls the hypostatic obedience of the Son “kenosis,” which Barth does not do.⁴²

In one of his clearer statements of his methodology considers the inner life of the Trinity, von Balthasar explains:

³⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 7, *The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 213–14. See also von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 35.

³⁸ Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 7:213–15.

³⁹ See von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 27–36.

⁴⁰ See: von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 79–83; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 479–80; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. 2, *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 354. On this topic, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* [CD IV/1], trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 192–210.

⁴¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 236–39.

⁴² See von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 79–83. Paul Dafydd Jones helpfully notes that the notion of obedience in Barth performs a similar function to kenosis in other theologies and that Barth generally refrains from using the term “kenosis” within his own theology (*The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* [London: T&T Clark, 2008], 214). One might add, however, that, in CD IV/1 and *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* [CD IV/2], trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), Barth frequently uses the notion of the “condescension” of the eternal Son in the Incarnation, which serves a function similar to that of kenosis.

Accordingly, there is only one way to approach the trinitarian life in God: on the basis of what is manifest in God's kenosis in the theology of the covenant—and thence in the theology of the Cross—we must feel our way back into the mystery of the absolute, employing a negative theology that excludes from God all intramundane experience and suffering, while at the same time presupposing that the possibility of such experience and suffering—up to and including its christological and trinitarian implications—is grounded in God.⁴³

The movement from the kenosis enacted on the Cross to the mystery of the Trinity occurs under an apophatic denial of the mundane experience and suffering and yet also presupposes the possibility and ability of God for Jesus Christ to participate in vicarious suffering and solidarity with all of those who experience suffering, abandonment, godlessness, and death. As the goal is the cross-fertilization of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Cross in such a way that the self-abasement and self-emptying are seen not as a contradiction to or a necessity of the divine essence, but as its gracious expression, von Balthasar locates this possibility and ability within the distinction and unity of the divine persons themselves through using a range of terms associated with kenosis to describe the processions and relations.

The purpose or function of von Balthasar's characterizations of the hypostatic relations in terms of giving up, self-surrender, self-expropriation, dispossession, selflessness, and personal and essential renunciation, and of the distinctions between the hypostases in terms of infinite distance, separation, and otherness, is to account for the divine activity in the economy in such a way that endangers neither the divine immutability and aseity nor God's genuine participation and presence in the economy. In this way, the Son as infinitely other than the Father means that the Son "both grounds and surpasses all we mean by separation, pain and alienation in the world and all we can envisage in terms of loving self-giving, interpersonal relationship and blessedness. He is not the direct identity of the two but their presupposition, sovereignly surpassing them."⁴⁴ The essential donation of the Father to the Son "implies such an incomprehensible and unique 'separation' of God from himself that it *includes* and grounds every other separation."⁴⁵ The separation of God from himself in

⁴³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4, *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 324.

⁴⁴ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:325.

⁴⁵ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:325. 'Without this personal distance in the *circum-incessio* of the Persons it would be impossible to understand either the creature's

the personal distinctions of the Trinity exceeds all other separations, even those of death and hell, “for hell is only possible given the absolute and real separation of Father and Son.”⁴⁶ Likewise, the Father’s begetting of the Son involves a renunciation of being God for himself, and in this way: “He lets go of his divinity and, in this sense, manifests a (divine) God-lessness (of love, of course). The latter must not be confused with the godlessness that is found within the world, although it undergirds it, renders it possible and goes beyond it.”⁴⁷ Even more strongly, von Balthasar describes the Father’s begetting and spirating as “total self-giving, to which the Son and Spirit respond by an equal self-giving” as “a kind of ‘death,’ a first radical ‘kenosis,’ as one might say. It is a kind of ‘super-death’ that is a component of all love and that forms the basis in creation for all instance of ‘the good death,’ from self-forgetfulness in favor of the beloved right up to that highest love by which a man ‘gives his life for friends.’”⁴⁸ The use of this language is not meant to be an eternal recapitulation of the drama of salvation within God, but the identification of the possibility, ground, and surpassing of all that occurs within the economy, even the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. In this way, the “primal divine drama”⁴⁹ is the “unfathomable precondition and source of the world’s salvation,” for “the drama of the emptying of the Father’s heart, in the generation of the Son” in the unity of the Spirit “contains and surpasses all possible drama between God and a world. For the world only has its place within that distinction between Father and Son that is maintained and bridged by the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁰

This emphasis upon the distinctions of the persons is supplemented by the notion of the Trinitarian relations as a coincidence between self-possession and self-dispossession, wealth and poverty, and self-expression and self-surrender. Von Balthasar notes that “in generating the Father has not given over his substance to the Son so as not to keep it himself, but the opposite is equally true: he remains the Father as he has eternally given

distance from God or the Son’s ‘economic’ distance from the Father—a distance that goes to the limit of forsakenness”; von Balthasar, *Theodrama*, vol. 5, 98.

⁴⁶ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:325.

⁴⁷ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:324.

⁴⁸ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:84.

⁴⁹ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:325.

⁵⁰ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:327. Or again: “It is possible to say that the generation of the Son that the Father strips himself of his Godhead and gives it over to the Son; the Father as complete self-giving, with an absolute, infinite distance that can contain all other distances. He will not be God for himself” (von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:322–24).

over to the Son all that is his,”⁵¹ and that the Father “does not extinguish himself by self-giving, just as he does not keep back anything either. For, in this self-surrender, he *is* the whole divine essence. Here we see both God’s infinite power and his powerlessness.”⁵² Because he is the Father, the Father begets and spirates and in this way renounces being-for-himself, not simply as the divine essence, but in his own person as well. The hypostases do not jealously guard the divine essence, but instead both possess and give away the divine nature such that “we cannot say that a particular hypostasis is rich in possessing and poor in giving away, for the fullness of blessedness lies in both giving and receiving both the gift and the giver.”⁵³ This combination of giving and of receiving both the divine essence and their personal relations means that “the hypostatic modes constitute the greatest imaginable opposition one to another (and thus no one of them can overtake any other), in order that they can mutually interpenetrate in the most intimate manner conceivable.”⁵⁴

Von Balthasar is aware of some of the difficulties of and potential objections to his theology of the Trinity. In a letter to Thomas Rudolf Krenski, for instance, von Balthasar recommends that one should not belabor the point of the existence of kenosis within the Trinity, that it is meant to be the *analogatum princeps* of Philippians 2 and 1 Corinthians 1:17, and that kenosis belongs in quotation marks when used in this context.⁵⁵ Likewise, von Balthasar recognizes that language associated with kenosis belongs within a range of other terms used for elaborating a doctrine of the Trinity. In his *Epilogue*, the summation of his trilogy, von Balthasar states that “in God himself the total epiphany, self-surrender, and self-expression of God the Father *is* the Son, identical with him as God.”⁵⁶ Additionally, as noted above, von Balthasar notes that there is a fundamental negative limit in this venture, for there is also a denial of “intramundane” experience, suffering, and temporality, and he also clarifies that the “godlessness” present in the Father’s giving up of himself and his essence to the Son and Spirit is not the same as any type of godlessness found in the economy. He even concedes: “Their bestowal of freedom presupposes this self-emptying, this

⁵¹ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, 2:135–37.

⁵² Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:324–25.

⁵³ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:258.

⁵⁴ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:258.

⁵⁵ Noted in a personal letter to Thomas Rudolf Krenski; see Krenski, *Passio caritatis: trinitarische Passiologie im Werk Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1990), 140–41, 363.

⁵⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 89–90.

kenosis, this *exinanitio*. Those who are reluctant to import such concepts into God (preferring to stay at the level of the equation *relatio = persona*) ought to remove these imperfect likenesses from the world,”⁵⁷ although von Balthasar himself does not seem to do this removal here.

Perhaps the most significant work which von Balthasar undertakes when finding in the “mystery of the absolute” the possibility of God’s work and participation in the economy while denying the univocal attribution of creaturely experience and suffering to God is his distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity. For von Balthasar: “The economic Trinity assuredly appears as the interpretation of the immanent Trinity, for the latter grounds and supports the former. Otherwise the immanent, eternal Trinity would threaten to dissolve into the economic.”⁵⁸ The economic Trinity is the expression and interpretation of the immanent Trinity, which in turn grounds and supports it. This combination of claims allows von Balthasar to argue that: “The immanent Trinity must be understood to be that eternal, absolute self-surrender whereby God is seen to be, in himself, absolute love; this in turn explains his self-giving to the world as love, without suggesting that God needed the world process and the Cross in order to become himself.”⁵⁹ Von Balthasar explicitly distinguishes his doctrine of the Trinity and of *kenosis* from that of Moltmann or Hegel,⁶⁰ as the former eliminates the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity and the latter understands *kenosis* in terms of God’s essence, in the register of the necessary, and as the concretization of an abstract Trinity.⁶¹ Nevertheless, for von Balthasar, the immanent Trinity can be characterized in terms and actions from the economy, such as self-surrender, absolute love, and self-giving, inasmuch as the distinction between the immanent and the economic allows one to deny that God needed the world or the Cross to become himself, or that God was virtual, or abstract, or self-enclosed without creation.

⁵⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. 3, *The Spirit of Truth*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 241.

⁵⁸ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:508. See also von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 35, and *Theo-Drama*, 3:157.

⁵⁹ Von Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 4:322–23.

⁶⁰ For an exploration of the differences between Hegel and von Balthasar on *kenosis*, see Cyril O’Regan, *Anatomy of Misremembering: Von Balthasar’s Response to Philosophical Modernity*, vol. 1, *Hegel* (New York: Crossroad, 2014), 165–67, 209, 229–31, 358.

⁶¹ Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 23–36.

Evaluation

A series of powerful arguments have recently been levied against such epistemologically rich and metaphysically luxuriant theologies of the Trinity and the divine life. There has been the stress for a renewed apophaticism within the doctrine of the Trinity;⁶² the insistence that the economy is primarily enacted for us and for our salvation, rather than an event within or an enrichment of God's own life;⁶³ the reassertion of the evangelical importance of divine *apatheia* as the true basis and promise of the annihilation of sin, evil, and suffering;⁶⁴ the argument that one should acknowledge the difference between the missions and the processions, given that the Father, Son, and Spirit are present to and acting within a world wounded by sin and marked by finitude;⁶⁵ the worry that the projections involved in these ventures presume competitive relations between the members of the Trinity;⁶⁶ the claim that the idea of an inner-Trinitarian obedience on behalf of the Son ruptures the single divine will;⁶⁷ and the argument that the identity of the economic and immanent Trinity imperils the freedom and transcendence of God.⁶⁸ The reminders are entirely salutary and all of

⁶² Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 956 (October 2000): 432–45; Kilby, "Aquinas, the Trinity, and the Limits of Understanding," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 4 (2005): 414–27; Kilby, "Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 1 (2010): 65–77.

⁶³ Kathryn Tanner, "Social Trinitarianism and its Critics," in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Robert J. Woźniak and Giulio Maspero (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 368–86.

⁶⁴ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 157–67.

⁶⁵ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 2005), 48–52; Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 180–87.

⁶⁶ Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 394, 130.

⁶⁷ Thomas Joseph White, O.P., "Intra-Divine Obedience in Karl Barth and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 6, no. (2008): 377–402, material of which reappears in White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 277–307.

⁶⁸ Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark and Continuum, 2002); Molnar, *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

them are worth heeding inasmuch as the doctrine of the Trinity is first and foremost a mystery of the faith.

When evaluating Bulgakov's and von Balthasar's proposals for an inner-Trinitarian kenosis, it might be helpful first to indicate how much conceptual labor, definition, and redefinition are undertaken when explicating the doctrine of the Trinity.⁶⁹ Terms and concepts such as "person," "relation," "essence," "generation," and "procession" undergo drastic rarefaction when employed within doctrines of the Trinity. While conscripted for the sake of evangelical necessity, in and of themselves these terms stand as inadequate and problematic: from "person" there needs to be removed the connotation of individual consciousness; from "relation" there need to be removed suggestions of reference to another who does not share the same essence, as well as of accidental existence; from "essence" there need to be removed ideas of composition, division, and separation; and from "generation" and "procession" there need to be removed notions of transitive movement, temporality, materiality, change from potency to actuality, and suffering. This apophatic removal can be driven by the exigencies of the divine simplicity,⁷⁰ or by a logic of perfection and excellence (which should proceed carefully so as not to denigrate the goods of finite creatures in a mistaken attempt to elevate God further), or by a desire to secure the infinite ontological difference between Creator and creation.⁷¹

Clarification and redefinition are still necessary once we move beyond these preliminaries: the names of the persons—Father, Son, and Spirit, or Principle, Fount, Word, Image, Gift, Love—are themselves analogical (terms taken from creatures to speak of God but of which God is the *analogans* and creatures the *analogata*) and must be conceptually purified

⁶⁹ As Kilby has aptly put it, "terms such as 'processions,' 'relations' and 'perichoresis' might be considered technical ways to articulate our inability to understand rather than rich conceptual resources which shed some light on the Trinity" ("Apophatic Trinitarianism," 67–68). Or in the words of John Webster, "the doctrine of eternal generation is not confident projective ontotheology; it become a matter for theological inquiry at a certain risk, and may be approached only after some clear spiritual and intellectual protocols have been put in place" (*God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *God and the Works of God* [London: Bloomsbury, 2016], 32).

⁷⁰ As when Bernard Lonergan notes, "we likewise do not know what divine understanding is or what the divine word is or what divine love is, or what is meant by generation or spiration or procession or relation or property or notional act or anything else what is really identical with God" (*The Triune God: Doctrines*, trans. Michael G. Shields [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009], 589).

⁷¹ Webster, *God Without Measure*, 1:32–34.

and shorn of misleading associations: the personal property of the innascibility of the Father is still a comparison and reference to the personal properties of the Son and Spirit; to be generated or spirated is just as divine as to generate and spirate; origin does not denote superiority or priority; and while the statement that the “Father begets the Son” suggests the pre-existence of the person before the relation, this linguistic difficulty can be accounted for by a recognition of differences in the mode of signification, whether by relation or by substance, by act or by form, and by stressing how the Son and the Spirit are themselves co-eternal (or even *autotheos*) by nature.

In light of the necessity for this constant removal of problematic conceptual collateral, it is reasonable when Thomas Aquinas maintains that intellectual emanation provides the most helpful or least misleading analogy for understanding procession. Thomas notes: “Yet, above them all the procession of the word from the intellect represents it more exactly; the intellectual word not being posterior to its source except in an intellect passing from potentiality to act; and this cannot be said of God.”⁷² Bernard Lonergan takes this argument even further when he suggests that “there remains no likeness of nature to the mode of divine procession except the intellectual emanation through which a conscious act originates from a conscious act according to a conscious and autonomous mode.”⁷³ There seems to be a difference between Thomas and Lonergan, however, as indicated in the shift from “represents it more exactly” to “no likeness . . . except.” Earlier in the same question from the *prima pars*, for instance, Thomas states:

As Augustine says (*De Verbis Domini*, Sermon 38), no mode of the procession of any creature perfectly represents the divine generation. Hence we need to gather a likeness of it from many of these modes, so that what is wanting in one may be somewhat supplied by another; and thus it is declared in the council of Ephesus: *Let Splendor tell thee that the co-eternal Son existed always with the Father; let the Word announce the impassibility of His Birth; let the name Son insinuate his consubstantiality.*⁷⁴

⁷² *ST I*, q. 42, a. 2, ad 1.

⁷³ Bernard Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics*, trans. Michael G. Shields (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 181. For a comparison of Lonergan and Balthasar on the Trinity, see Peter Drilling, “Relating the Theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Bernard Lonergan on Divine Action in the World,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 81:3 (2016): 267–83.

⁷⁴ *ST I*, q. 42, a. 2, ad 1.

Such reasons for employing the diversity of names for the second person of the Trinity are also present in Thomas's lectures on John:

An example of this, to a limited degree, appears in fire and in the brightness issuing from it: for this brightness issues naturally and without succession from the fire. Again, if the fire were eternal, its brightness would be coeternal with it. This is why the Son is called the brightness of the Father: "the brightness of his glory" (Heb 1:3). But this example lacks an illustration of the identity of nature. And so we call him Son, although in human sonship we do not find coeternity: for we must attain our knowledge of divine things from many likenesses in material things, for one likeness is not enough. The Council of Ephesus says that the Son always coexists with the Father: for "brightness" indicates his unchangeability, "birth" points to the Word himself, but the name "Son" suggests his consubstantiality. And so we give the Son various names to express his perfection, which cannot be expressed by one name. We call him "Son" to show that he is of the same nature as the Father; we call him "image" to show that he is not unlike the Father in any way; we call him "brightness" to show that he is coeternal; and he is called the "Word" to show that he is begotten in an immaterial manner.⁷⁵

The appeal to the venerable and varied names of the second person of Trinity allows for the inevitable deficiencies of one to be supplemented by likenesses drawn from another for the sake of expressing the Son's perfection: a Splendor being radiated eternally, an Image which illustrates exact similitude, a Word being uttered immaterially, and a Son of the same essence being birthed impassibly. To be sure, Thomas privileges "Word," and thus "intellectual emanation," among these names and concepts,⁷⁶ but this privileging and conceptual regulation stems from the precision and minimalism possible for this Scriptural name for the second person. From these various names and concepts, *Word* and *intellectual procession* best respect both the exigencies of confessing three equal and co-eternal hypostases constituted by their mutual relations and the ineffable nature of generation and proces-

⁷⁵ Aquinas, *Super Ioan* 1, lec. 1 (Marietti nos. 41–42), as in *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. James A. Weisheipl, O.P. (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1980).

⁷⁶ See Gilles Emery, O.P., *The Trinitarian Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194.

sion. With both this confession and apophatic baseline there co-exist other names and concepts, as when Thomas notes (as quoted just above) that “we need to gather a likeness of it from many of these modes” and “must attain our knowledge of divine things from many likenesses in material things, for one likeness is not enough.”

There has been a long precedent of drawing Trinitarian concepts, terms, and analogies from the realms of the physical (generation and spiration), the intellectual and volitional (the immanent procession of Word and Love; memory, understanding, will), and the interpersonal (lover, beloved, and love itself). There have also been elaborations of the Trinity through terms and analogies from revelation, glorification, self-communication, the nature of the good, and personhood. The likenesses being gathered when describing the Trinity in terms of kenosis and related terms come from a modality of interpersonal love.⁷⁷ More specifically, both Bulgakov and von Balthasar develop their doctrines of the Trinity through elaboration of the claim that “God is love” (1 John 4) and its surrounding context of the visible mission of the Son. This form of interpersonal love, the extravagant, self-giving, and sacrificial love of God and the Son, is then adopted for use amongst other names and terms for describing the persons, the relations, the processions, and the essence. In other words, the suggestion is that the mutual self-constitution of the persons—traditionally described in the language of the three personal properties of paternity, filiation, and spiration, and their inseparability—can also be glossed in the more immediately evangelical modalities of love: self-giving, self-surrender, self-renunciation, and mutual openness and transparency.⁷⁸ These modalities of “love” are then applied both notionally (as the spirating of the Spirit as love and the Spirit’s perfecting of the mutual love of the Father and Son) and essentially (as Father, Son, and Spirit love themselves and

⁷⁷ After Augustine and before the nineteenth-century mediating theologians, it was Richard of St. Victor who developed the Trinity under the aspect of interpersonal love and that the perfection of love in God means that the relation and love between the Father, Son, and Spirit is in no way egoistic or partial or self-depleting. See his line of argument and description in his *On the Trinity*, bk. III.

⁷⁸ One of the primary semantic difficulties of this way of speaking is that the Father has no ‘self,’ either to give or to have or to empty or to surrender, in isolation from the Son and Spirit. However, this semantic difficulty is shared by any account of the divine persons when they are signified by substance or form rather than by relation or act, as von Balthasar himself was aware: “The Father must not be thought to exist ‘prior’ to this self-surrender (in an Arian sense): he is this movement of self-giving that holds nothing back” (*Theo-Drama*, 4:323).

each other by essence).⁷⁹ Additionally, the mutual and reciprocal constitution of Father, Son, and Spirit is being glossed in terms of interpersonal love as both giving oneself to and receiving oneself from another, and is then further expanded through the venerable practice of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, as the coincidence and surpassing of the pairs of fullness and emptiness, self-possession and self-reception, being oneself from another and being oneself in another, and power and powerlessness.

More problematic in the proposals of Bulgakov and von Balthasar, however, seems to be the suggestion of loss, diminution, separation, tragedy, and death within and amongst the Trinitarian relations. The intent of such language is clear and laudable: that whatever occurs in the economy is always already preceded and established and always already preempted and resolved in the immanent relations. In other words, the sending of the Son and Spirit presupposes and reflects their generation and procession and the selflessness of the Father, while the abandonment and death of the Son presupposes and reflects the circular self-giving-away of the Father, Son, and Spirit. In this way, abandonment and death become genuinely suffered and underwent so as to be defeated and constitute no alteration in God, for nothing undergone in the economy can disrupt the inner Triune life even as the persons are fully present and utterly themselves. Should one wish to speak of loss, suffering, and death in God, which is not an obvious or clear matter, then the most appropriate form of this speech should remain in the register of the experiencing, overcoming, and healing of suffering in a kind of extension of the statement that “what is not assumed is not healed.” The distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, or between the processions and the missions, helps to ensure that this way of speaking is not the pre-temporal placement of historical events and strife within God, but ensures God’s genuine participation and presence within the economy without being overwhelmed or altered by them. The Incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection of the Son are not a self-divestment or abandonment of his deity, but its gracious, temporal, and historical expression under the conditions of the economy. Salutory here is John Webster’s remark that “whatever else may be said about God’s becoming, that becoming must be understood as a mode of his sovereign self-possession, an aspect of his inexhaustible plenitude.”⁸⁰

Another way of responding to the potentially problematic elements of loss, separation, and death would be a reminder that the work effected

⁷⁹ Cf. *ST* 1, q. 38, a. 2, and Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15.7.

⁸⁰ John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 137.

in the Incarnation is the salvation of humanity from its sin, misery, and inhumanity and that reconciliation is wholly offered *ad extra*. What takes place in the economy is wholly for us and for our salvation. God does not need to be saved from anything; from remote transcendence; from an indeterminate identity or abstraction; from an inability to empathize with the sufferings or experiences of his creatures; or from his own omnipotence, eternality, or perfection. A variety of doctrinal resources can aid in this reassertion: the eternal essential unity and mutual indwelling of the Father and Son and Spirit such that they could never be divided or lost or opaque to one another; God's wholly realized life and perfection; reconciliation as self-communication and revelation rather than self-constitution; and the shared divine goodness, will, and love. If one wished to speak of the Son's vicarious solidarity with the dead, the abandoned, and the godforsaken (and it is unclear whether it is wise to speak of anyone as objectively abandoned by God or as godforsaken) to describe Jesus Christ's reception of the whole range of human experience (which is welcome), then it is best done with this background of divine unity and aseity. Shorn of the divine unity and aseity, doctrines of reconciliation tend toward becoming an event between Father, Son, and Spirit, rather than an economy graciously initiated by God on behalf of and for the sake of his creatures. Robert Jenson, for example, offers this striking conjunction of the parable of the vineyard keeper,⁸¹ reconciliation, and the doctrine of the Trinity:

The eternal inner-triune decision made at the Crucifixion and Resurrection was between the parable as told, with a dead Son and slaughter of the vineyard-keepers, and raising a Son who insists rather on forgiving them. The Father can have his Son and us with him in the bargain, or he can abolish us and have no Son, for there is no Son but the one who said, "Father, forgive them."⁸²

This gloss is moving and poignant and yet is accompanied by the implication of a general and troubling uncertainty regarding the mission of the Son and the unity of the Trinity until his Resurrection by the Father in the Spirit. Such uncertainty can be removed by viewing the whole life-act of the Son as the undivided, eternal, and invincible will and love of the Father,

⁸¹ Matt 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19. The parable itself is a rereading and reapplication of Isaiah 5.

⁸² Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 191.

Son, and Spirit in the work of reconciliation.

What also seems difficult to labor into acceptability is the related notion of the presence of obedience or grace among the persons of the Trinity.⁸³ There are plausible reasons behind these statements: that the pattern of divine action *ad extra*, with the Father initiating, the Son executing, and Spirit sealing, follows and reveals the relations of the hypostases; that there must be some quality or property within God which corresponds to his action in the economy; and the sense that the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit does not mean uniformity,⁸⁴ or that the hypostatization of the divine nature is total and complete for each person of the Trinity.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, how could one speak of obedience or grace between the Father, Son, and Spirit without risking the disruption of the divine unity, the strict equality of the persons, and the idea of essential and personal donation? The terms “grace” and “obedience” themselves would need to be subjected to purification and refinement inherent within theology’s analogical discourse and judgments when being applied to God, and in this way mark clearly the differences between obedience and grace within the Trinity and the grace given by God to his creatures and the obedience offered by creatures to God in return. One could certainly affirm that God is inherently and essentially gracious but remove any attendant difficulties by having “grace” in this context fundamentally mean love and goodness. Additionally, it seems that the presupposition of dyothelitism is that Jesus Christ’s divine will is simply the will of the eternal Son, which is none other than the will of the Father and the Spirit, and that the unalterably loving and perfect divine will allows for the assumption, healing, and perfecting of a human will. Given the common essential and personal will of Father, Son, and Spirit, it seems unclear what “obedience” could mean when applied within the Trinity. As for these related ideas of grace and obedience within the Trinity, then, it seems as though there are few if any likenesses to gather.

⁸³ As for grace within God, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 356–58, and the material, Christological specification in *CD* IV/1, 303–4, and its pneumatological specification in *CD* IV/2, 338–53. As for obedience within God, see *CD* IV/1, 192–210.

⁸⁴ My thanks to Jess Keating for this way of putting the matter.

⁸⁵ “The nature does *not* exist in Divinity as an independent principle, in which the difference of the hypostases is abolished and the two are as one. The ray of each hypostasis penetrates down to the very bottom of the nature and totally hypostatizes it. That is why it is impossible to posit *two* hypostases that would be *one* in nature, that would lose, as it were, their individual hypostatic personhood” (Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 140).

Conclusion

To address the question of whether there is an inner-Trinitarian kenosis requires prior deliberations upon what “kenosis” is taken to mean and involve as regards the Incarnation of the eternal Son and the life and obedience of Jesus Christ, and it demands attention to the potential differences between this Christological kenosis and how the idea is being extended into the doctrine of the Trinity. If “kenosis” is taken in its lightest sense, simply as self-giving, self-offering, and self-communication, there one can and should readily imagine a transcendental ground within the Trinitarian relations for the Incarnation and life of the eternal Son. In fact, this claim seems to be another way of stating that the missions are contained within and follow the processions, here glossed in the register of interpersonal love. While slightly more problematic, if “kenosis” is meant as self-renunciation, self-sacrifice, and self-oblation for another with the concomitant reception of oneself in the other, then it seems that one could use such terms to illustrate the reciprocally constituting relations among Father, Son, and Spirit and their essential and hypostatic circumincession. If “kenosis” is taken to mean self-diminution, self-extinction, self-curtailement, or loss, then the idea seems to have little to do with the Trinity, or with the Incarnation for that matter.

The initial recognitions of the Trinity as a mystery and confession of the faith, and then developed with salutary austerity, rigor, and formality, can and should open up toward a gathering of many likenesses. In this way, the mingling of the doctrine of the Trinity and kenosis allows for generation, procession, and relation to be illustrated with likenesses from the realm of interpersonal love and with themes drawn from the Scriptural context and narrative of the sending and giving of the Son which surround the statement that “God is love” (1 John 4:16). This linguistic and conceptual expansion seems appropriate for expressing and imaging the infinite liveliness of God as pure and unique act and the splendor and variety of the divine perfections, and offers a reminder that the Trinity is not a geometrical puzzle or a mechanical system, but the infinite and perfect life of the Father, Son, and Spirit with all its harmony, difference, overflow, joy, openness, and loving communion.