

## TRINITARIAN SPIRIT CHRISTOLOGY: IN NEED OF A NEW METAPHYSICS?

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*Trinitarian Spirit Christology emphasizes in a new way the activity of the Holy Spirit both within the immanent Trinity and in salvation history. But, the author argues, this shift in thinking about the Holy Spirit suggests a new metaphysics based on intersubjective relations and simultaneous mutual causality between the entities thus involved. Such an organismic approach to the God-world relationship, moreover, resonates with the new emphasis on systems-oriented thinking within the natural and social sciences*

GROWING INTEREST IN SPIRIT CHRISTOLOGY is one of the more interesting developments in contemporary Christian systematic theology. It lends itself to two quite different understandings of the person of Jesus, either as the Spirit-inspired human being *par excellence* or as the Word of God become incarnate in the human nature of Jesus through the conjoint activity of all three divine Persons. It can be seen, in other words, as either a Christology “from below” or as a somewhat modified Christology “from above.” In the latter case, it also introduces a new understanding of the classical dogma of the Trinity. Instead of thinking of the relations between the divine Persons in terms of eternal processions (active and passive generation, active and passive spiration), one can instead propose that the Spirit eternally empowers the Father to generate the Son out of self-giving love and empowers the Son actively to respond to the Father’s offer of life and love through a correspondingly total gift of self. The Spirit, accordingly, is no longer the passive result of the conjoint active spiration of the Father and the Son, but rather a third agent in the collective activity of divine self-giving love by selflessly empowering Father and Son to relate to each other in the spirit of self-giving love.

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This line of thought is nicely laid out by New Zealand systematic theologian Myk Habets in his *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology*.<sup>1</sup> Habets argues that Spirit Christology should not replace the more traditional Logos Christology but rather complement it so as to present a Christology from below to above, that is, from the phenomenology or experiential workings of the economic Trinity as reported in the New Testament to the ontology or theoretically projected workings of the immanent Trinity, the relations of the divine Persons to one another from all eternity.

What might still be added to his presentation, however, is further philosophical reflection on what seems to be implied in Spirit Christology as thus understood, namely, a new understanding of intersubjectivity that would be based on Aquinas's notion of subsistent relations,<sup>2</sup> but rendered more dynamic in terms of a presupposition of mutually constitutive causal relations between the divine Persons. The classical notion of the divine processions, in other words, presupposes the unilateral directionality of traditional cause-effect relations (first the cause, then the effect) even as it claims that this unilateral directionality from Father to Son and then to the Spirit is purely logical, not temporal, given the alleged eternity of the divine life. The alternative, more-dynamic understanding of subsistent relations, however, presupposes that the three divine Persons are simultaneously both cause and effect of their ongoing "relatings" to one another. Father and Son are both cause and effect of their ongoing relationship to each other, and the Spirit is both cause and effect of the dynamic interrelations of Father and Son.

Furthermore, such a metaphysics of intersubjectivity, when properly qualified, might well have application in the natural order as well as in the strictly supernatural order of trinitarian relations. For example, mutually constitutive causal relations would seem better to explain the way an organism simultaneously both adapts and is adapted to the environment in which it is currently located. For that matter the organism is itself the ongoing product of interactive parts or members such that the parts and the whole at any given moment mutually condition one another's existence and activity.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, such a metaphysical scheme would be only a model or symbolic representation of what cannot be verified empirically, either with reference to the Divine Being or in reflecting on the workings of nature. Yet the value of such a proposal would be that it would bring

<sup>1</sup> Myk Habets, *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology* (Eugene, Oreg.: Pickwick, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947) 1, q. 29, a. 4 resp.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity* (New York: Oxford University, 1995) 23–30.

the dogma of the Trinity more “down to earth.” It would eliminate some (though obviously not all) of the mystery of the Divine Being as a reality infinitely distant from the normal workings of nature and thus as incomprehensible to the rational mind and ultimately a matter of faith.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows I first summarize Habets’s comments on Spirit Christology as developed by different groups of theologians: contemporary Roman Catholics like Walter Kasper, David Coffey, and Ralph Del Colle; various Protestant scholars both past and present; and finally Habets’s own understanding of Spirit Christology, which was heavily influenced by the trinitarian theology of Roman Catholic Thomas Weinandy. I then compare all these basically Thomistic Spirit Christologies with a process-oriented understanding of the trinitarian relations based on a rethinking of the category of “society” within the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead. That is, whereas Whitehead proposed a metaphysics of *universal subjectivity*, given his presupposition that “the final real things of which the world is made up” are actual entities or actual occasions, namely, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience in dynamic interrelation,<sup>5</sup> my revision of his notion of the category of “society” is directed toward a metaphysics of *universal intersubjectivity* with the traditional understanding of the Trinity as three Persons in one God serving as the model or philosophical paradigm for a society—or systems-based worldview. Such a metaphysical scheme would thus be applicable not only to the classical doctrine of God within the Christian tradition but also to our human understanding of the workings of human communities and natural environments within the world of creation.

## REVIEW OF *THE ANOINTED SON* BY MYK HABETS

### Overview and Critique of the Pertinent Literature

Rather than review all the chapters in Habets’s book, I focus on two key chapters, six and seven, which lay out in detail his own understanding of Spirit Christology in comparison with rival contemporary theories. In

<sup>4</sup> See Stanley Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 7: “The central concern of *The Named God and the Question of Being* is not the development of a Trinitarian ontology as such. Rather, the intent of this volume is to pursue the deeper question of ontology from a thoroughgoing Trinitarian perspective. This means that rather than asking about the implications of ontology for theology, the book seeks to ascertain the implications of the Christian conception of God as triune for the question of ontology.” In an appendix I offer some critical comments on Grenz’s position.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free, 1978) 18.

chapter six, Habets divides contemporary Spirit Christologies into two camps, those who see Spirit Christology as replacing the more traditional Logos Christology and those who see it as complementing Logos Christology; he includes his own Christology in the latter group.<sup>6</sup> The first group, for different reasons in each case, tends to downplay or even eliminate altogether the ontological reality of three Persons in one God. The second group can be further divided into Roman Catholic and Protestant proponents of Spirit Christology, all of whom see Spirit Christology as compensating for certain deficiencies in Logos Christology, notably an overemphasis on the relationship between the Father and the Son and the relatively passive role of the Holy Spirit in one's understanding of trinitarian life. Again for brevity's sake, I focus on just a few theologians within the second group. Among Roman Catholics, for example, Habets attends closely to the theories of Walter Kasper, David Coffey, and Ralph Del Colle. He notes, for example, that in Kasper's view "the hypostatic union is not the presupposition of Jesus' anointing with the Spirit but is instead its consequence. In this move, Kasper has made Logos Christology a consequence of a Spirit Christology, thus reversing the received tradition."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Habets cites with approval Coffey's claim that the "bestowal" or mutual love model of the trinitarian relations is more basic than the traditional procession model.<sup>8</sup> Finally, for Habets, Del Colle works hard to specify "the convergence and distinction between the Son and the Spirit in the person and work of Christ, and then in the immanent Trinity itself."<sup>9</sup>

Turning to Protestant proponents of a Spirit Christology, Habets first refers to John Owen and Edward Irving, who lived in the 17th and 18th centuries respectively. Owen defended the position that the Holy Spirit, not the Divine Word, acted directly on the human nature of Jesus, even though in the end Jesus was responsible for his own decisions.<sup>10</sup> Afterward Irving expanded this insight into the indispensable involvement of the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation: "The Son is the perfect image of God in the sense of being a reflection-in-dependence. This dependence was most intimately with the Father but importantly realized and experienced through the Spirit, both in the economic and immanent Trinity."<sup>11</sup> In neither his divine nor human natures, then, is the Son able by himself to procure the salvation of human beings. Everything that Jesus says and does is the work of Father, Son, and Spirit in close collaboration.<sup>12</sup> In the modern era Jürgen Moltmann in his many works on the Trinity and the activity

<sup>6</sup> Habets, *Anointed Son* 194–227.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 207.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 209–10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 214–15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 205.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 213.

of the Holy Spirit in the church confirmed these insights of Owen and Irving.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Gary Badcock, following Moltmann, emphasized the reciprocal relations or *perichoresis* among the divine Persons in the workings of both the economic and immanent Trinity.<sup>14</sup>

In light of these earlier versions of Spirit Christology, Habets then offers his own theory based on two presuppositions. First, “the three persons of the Trinity, as they reveal themselves in the economy of salvation, manifest their inner-Trinitarian life and relationships in accord with the axiom that ‘the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity.’”<sup>15</sup> Second, “the economic Trinity is primarily expressed in functional terms in the Bible, yet inherent in these functional categories lies a Trinitarian ontology.”<sup>16</sup> So the immanent Trinity is not to be explained in relatively abstract philosophical language with minimal attention to the pertinent texts of Scripture but much more experientially with constant reference to how the New Testament depicts Jesus. In this way, Habets aims to show how Spirit Christology and Logos Christology are complementary, not antagonistic. For this task, he relies especially on Weinandy’s *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship* in which the author claims at the start that “a proper understanding of the Trinity can only be attained if all three persons, logically and ontologically, spring forth in one simultaneous, nonsequential, eternal act in which each person of the Trinity subsistently defines, and equally is subsistently defined by, the other persons.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, quoting Weinandy, Habets concludes, “‘the Father begets the Son in or by the Holy Spirit. . . . The Son, being begotten in the Spirit, simultaneously loves the Father in the same Spirit by which he himself is begotten (is Loved).’”<sup>18</sup> This is the intrinsic coinherence or *perichoresis* of the divine Persons whereby they are themselves, as individual Persons, not in themselves and by themselves but only in virtue of their ongoing activity vis-à-vis one another. Contrasting this understanding of the trinitarian relations with the different procession models employed in the Eastern Orthodox and Western traditions, Habets concludes:

In the East the tendency has been to see the Godhead as residing in the Father alone and he mediates divinity to the Son and Spirit. In the West, there is the particular impression that the Godhead is distinct from the three persons and is an independent but apophatic *ousia* of oneness. Both are incompatible with the biblical revelation. The Godhead is neither the Father alone nor a solitary substance separate from the three persons. The Godhead is the Trinity. The one Godhead is

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 217–18.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 218–20.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 221. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970) 21–22.

<sup>16</sup> Habets, *Anointed Son* 222.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 223; see Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M. Cap., *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995) 14–15.

<sup>18</sup> Habets, *Anointed Son* 224; Weinandy, *Father’s Spirit of Sonship* 17.

the action of the Father begetting the Son and spirating the Spirit, thus sharing with them the whole of his deity, constituting them as equally divine.<sup>19</sup>

As I indicate below in laying out my own process-oriented version of the trinitarian relations, even this carefully qualified statement by Habets (and Weinandy) can be called into question. If the Godhead is indeed the Trinity and not one of the divine Persons, then should not all three Persons share in the Godhead equally and coconstitute one another as one God in three persons? Does not the alleged *monarchia* of the Father (unless carefully qualified) unintentionally compromise what is asserted as the mutual relatedness or *perichoresis* of the three divine Persons?

### Fashioning a “Third Article” Theology

In his chapter seven, Habets explores the possibility of developing a theology of the third article of the Creed, one focused on the Person and activity of the Spirit within salvation history. He notes that Stanley Grenz, Clark Pinnock, Lyle Dabney, and Amos Jung contributed significantly to his own understanding of a theology of the third article, “a theology of God’s mission of a transforming recreation of creation, a theology of continuity in God’s presence and purpose in creation and re-creation through the discontinuity of human sin and death.”<sup>20</sup> It is, accordingly, a theology based on transformation of life in this world, not liberation from it. Thus, particularly in the area of soteriology, a third-article theology changes what has been classically understood in terms of second-article theology, namely, the person and mission of Jesus as the Christ, the Savior of the world. Three themes stand out: mystical union with Christ, the Eastern orthodox notion of *theosis*, and a *pneumatologia crucis*.

With reference to the first, Habets notes: “The sole access to the Father is through Christ the Son, made possible by faith which is the operation of the Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> In being organically united with Christ in the power of the Spirit, Christians are simultaneously linked with the Father and with one another in the unity of the Mystical Body. *Theosis*—literally, divinization or participation in the divine life—should thus be understood as justification not only through Christ, but through the Spirit. While *theosis* will not be fully achieved in this life, yet it is already at work here and now: “presently we are able to utter those eschatological words ‘Abba, Father’; already we are able to partake of the Spirit of life, the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God.”<sup>22</sup> Finally, quoting Dabney, Habets claims: “The Holy Spirit can best be named by returning to the historical point of departure for Protestant theology’s talk of God, the cross of Jesus Christ, and

<sup>19</sup> Habets, *Anointed Son* 225.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 245.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 232

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 249.

reclaiming that *theologia crucis* for a theology of the Holy Spirit, a *pneumatologia crucis*.”<sup>23</sup> In the event of the crucifixion, accordingly, the *kenosis* of God is reflected in the sacrifice of the Father in delivering up his Son to death on the cross, the feeling of God-forsakenness in Jesus while dying on the cross, and the “abnegation” of the Spirit in seeing the bond between the Father and the Son temporarily suspended in Jesus’ anguished cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>24</sup> It is, of course, only a temporary suspension of the workings of the Spirit of Sonship, but one that effectively symbolizes the regular frustration of the Spirit in dealing with human beings as they painfully make their way to union with the triune God in this life.

### A PROCESS-ORIENTED TRINITARIAN SPIRIT CHRISTOLOGY

Turning now to a process-oriented version of a trinitarian Spirit Christology, I first review the problematic for any Christology if it is to be consistent with the teaching of the church at the councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451). I then indicate how an appropriate revision of the category of “society” in the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead might deal with these theological issues and at the same time open up the possibility of a comprehensive society- or systems-oriented approach to the world of creation.

#### Rethinking What Is Meant by Person and Nature

The challenge for any philosophical understanding of the dogmas of the Trinity and of the Incarnation is to make clear what one means by “person” and “nature” in both these contexts. According to Nicaea, the three divine Persons are one God through sharing one and the same divine nature (DS 125). According to Chalcedon, Jesus the Word incarnate is one divine Person simultaneously existing in two natures, divine and human, which are distinct but inseparable (DS 301–2). Is this language simply logical legerdemain on the part of the Council Fathers? Or can one come up with a bona fide philosophical explanation that makes sense of the terms “person” and “nature” even apart from the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation? For the moment I tentatively propose that in the official formulation of the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation “nature” should be understood as a creative activity and “person” as an entity or, better said, an agent who subsists—i.e., actively constitutes itself—in virtue of that

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 253. See also Lyle Dabney, “Naming the Spirit: Toward a Pneumatology of the Cross,” in *Starting with the Spirit*, ed. Gordon R. Preece and Stephen K. Pickard (Hindmarsh, S. Aust.: Australian Theological Forum, 2001) 30.

<sup>24</sup> Habets, *Anointed Son* 253–56; Mark 15:33–34.

creative activity. The three divine Persons, accordingly, are one God in virtue of conjointly exercising one and the same corporate act, namely, the creative activity of self-giving love both for one another and for all their creatures. Aquinas argued that the works of God *ad extra* are one.<sup>25</sup> I would argue that the works of God *ad intra* are likewise one. All three divine Persons give unselfish love to, and receive unselfish love from, one another at every moment as coparticipants in one and the same corporate act.

With reference to the dogma of the Incarnation, this understanding of “nature” as creative activity and “person” as an agent subsisting or constituting itself in virtue of that activity, a further nuance is needed. Because Jesus has two natures, one divine and one human, he exercises two different agencies, but only one of these agencies is personal or ontologically subsistent. The other is subpersonal or ontologically subordinate to the first agency, but it still maintains its own more limited mode of operation within the higher-order agency. This reference to lower- and higher-order agencies may sound like my own form of legerdemain, but it is a common enough phenomenon within the world of creation. For example, natural scientists tell us that an atom within a molecule is still an atom, but it is limited or constrained in its mode of operation by being a constitutive part of a molecule. Many molecules, in turn, are constrained in their mode of operation by being linked with other similarly organized molecules so as to constitute a cell with its higher level of existence and activity within nature. The agency or mode of operation of Jesus in his human nature, of course, is of a higher order than the agency proper to an atom within a molecule or a molecule within a cell. Jesus exhibits much more spontaneity or freedom of choice in the exercise of his human nature than an atom within a molecule or a molecule within a cell exercises. But as a divine-human person, Jesus was still constrained in the exercise of his human nature. He could not, in other words, act in total independence of his divine nature or divine mode of operation without destroying his ontological identity as the Word incarnate.

Given this understanding of “person” and “nature,” I can offer a preliminary justification for the claims made by Habets and others for Spirit Christology. That is, in virtue of his divine nature Jesus is engaged in the single divine act of self-giving love that he shares with the Father and the Spirit within the divine life. In virtue of his human nature, Jesus participates in that divine activity of self-giving love between the divine Persons but within the limits of his humanity. That is, what he did during his earthly life in virtue of his human nature was incorporated into what he did in his divine nature acting in conjunction with the Father and the Spirit. Since, as already noted, the three divine Persons are one God in virtue of exercising one and the same corporate act, all three Persons were active in the earthly

<sup>25</sup> *ST* 1, q. 45, a. 6 resp.



life and work of Jesus. But they were active in ways corresponding to the ways in which they relate to one another within the divine life. As I will explain below, the Father in a qualified sense originated every human action that Jesus performed during his earthly life, the Word was one with Jesus in responding to the Father from moment to moment, and the Spirit both enabled and inspired this ongoing exchange between Father and Son in and through the earthly life of Jesus. Just as in salvation history as a whole, therefore, every action of Jesus recorded in the Gospel narratives was the work of all three divine Persons even though their presence and mode of operation in any particular action of Jesus was necessarily quite different. Accordingly, Jesus revealed or made manifest not only the generic reality of God as self-giving love, but on closer inspection the reality of the Trinity as three Persons engaged in this single act of self-giving love.

If this line of thought seems strange, it may be due to our unconscious human proneness to think of the triune God in terms of either modalism or tritheism. That is, we find it difficult to think of God in anything other than individualistic terms. Hence, we sometimes are inadvertent modalists, thinking of God as one Person manifesting himself in three related but still quite different ways. At other times, we are virtual tritheists, thinking of God as a community of different individuals who have a special ability consistently to do things together. Either way, God is conceived in individualistic terms, either as one individual entity or as three individual entities in very close association. Precisely in dealing with this three-in-one character of God as Trinity is where a somewhat revised understanding of Whitehead's category of "society" could help us make the leap from an individualistic to a specifically social understanding not only of God but even of ourselves and the world around us.

### **A New Understanding of "Society"**

In his master work, *Process and Reality*, Whitehead argues that creativity, the foundational activity or motive force of the cosmic process, is ultimate reality,<sup>26</sup> but he also claims that actual entities, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience, are the "final real things of which this world is made up."<sup>27</sup> So for him the world is coconstituted by the interaction of a primordial activity and a huge number of dynamically interrelated "actual entities" that come into being in virtue of that activity. An actual entity is, of course, a psycho-physical event, a momentary self-constituting subject of experience that leaves the trace or pattern of its self-constitution

<sup>26</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

on the world around it.<sup>28</sup> But do these actual entities produce anything beyond themselves as transient, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience? Here Whitehead makes reference to “societies” as aggregates of actual entities that are genetically linked to one another in virtue of what he calls a “common element of form” or intelligible pattern.<sup>29</sup> In my judgment this is where the master nodded. Besides postulating a foundational activity and agents to instantiate or make specific that foundational activity from moment to moment, there must be something objective and enduring that results from all that interrelated activity. Claiming that a “society” is an aggregate of analogously self-constituted subjects of experience at any given moment is not enough. A “society” should be understood as an enduring corporate reality or objective “system” of relationships initially generated and then continually sustained by its interdependent parts or members, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience. Only thus can Whitehead have what he clearly wants, namely, an event-oriented ontology to replace the thing- or substance-oriented ontology of classical metaphysics. Such an event-oriented ontology needs not only a universal principle of novelty or spontaneity, but an enduring principle of continuity or permanence. Within Whitehead’s metaphysical scheme, an understanding of “society” as an objective system distinct from and yet interdependent, with its constituent actual entities in their dynamic interrelation from moment to moment, provides the necessary principle of continuity and permanence.

But would such a revised understanding of “society” still be consistent with the rest of Whitehead’s metaphysical scheme? Yes, provided that a Whiteheadian “society” is conceived as an ongoing structured field of activity for successive sets of constituent actual entities. Whitehead’s own comments in *Process and Reality* about the nature of “societies” seems to allow for such a claim:

Every society must be considered with its background of a wider environment of actual entities, which also contribute their objectifications to which the members of the society must conform. . . . But this means that the environment, together with the society in question, must form a larger society in respect to some more general characters than those defining the society from which we started.<sup>30</sup>

Whether named an “environment” or a “structured field of activity,” a Whiteheadian “society” is thus an enduring law-like context for its constituent actual entities. As such, this system bears some resemblance to an Aristotelian substance since, like a substance, it is a principle of continuity

<sup>28</sup> This is my interpretation of Whitehead’s term “superject” as the empirical result or physical consequence of an actual entity’s momentary self-constitution; see *ibid.* 27–28.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 34–35.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 90.

in a world of continuous change. But unlike an Aristotelian substance, its form or defining characteristic can evolve or change as new sets of constituent actual entities arise with a different pattern of dynamic interrelationship.

As Whitehead comments in another passage from *Process and Reality*, “in a society, the members can only exist by reason of the laws which dominate the society, and the laws only come into being by reason of the analogous characters [self-constitution] of the members of the society.”<sup>31</sup> This statement logically entails that “societies” are coexistent with their constituent actual entities, serving as their necessary principle of continuity. Similarly, in his later book *Adventures of Ideas* Whitehead admits:

A society has an essential character, whereby it is the society which it is, and it also has accidental qualities which vary as circumstances alter. Thus a society . . . enjoys a history expressing its changing reactions to changing circumstances. But an actual occasion [actual entity] has no such history. It never changes. It only becomes and perishes.<sup>32</sup>

Here too the notion of the enduring reality of the “society” as opposed to its ever-changing component actual entities, comes to some limited expression in Whitehead’s thinking. So I conclude that the notion of a Whiteheadian “society” as a structured field of activity for its constituent actual entities from moment to moment can be considered a legitimate extension of Whitehead’s thinking on the subject.

### Application to Spirit Christology

Attending to the theological implications of this rethinking of the notion of “society” in Whitehead’s metaphysics, I can in the first place affirm that a trinitarian understanding of the God-world relationship now makes good sense within Whitehead’s metaphysics. Each of the three divine Persons is what Whitehead calls a “personally ordered” nexus (series) of actual entities with its own structured field of activity corresponding to its individual self-identity.<sup>33</sup> But, since each of these fields of activity for the divine Persons is by definition infinite in scope, they together constitute an all-comprehensive common field of activity—in Whiteheadian terms a “structured society” or complex unity of subordinate nexuses and subsocieties “with a definite pattern of structured inter-relations.”<sup>34</sup> This common field of activity gives the divine Persons their objective unity as one God. As members of one and the same structured field of activity, they have

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>32</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967) 204.

<sup>33</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 107.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 99.

everything in common apart from their relations of opposition to one another much as Aquinas for other reasons proposes in his *Summa Theologiae*.<sup>35</sup> That is, their ongoing dynamic interrelationship both unites and separates them from one another within the divine life. This would seem to be an appropriate philosophical explanation for the dogma of the Trinity as originally set forth at Nicaea.

Likewise, the definition of Jesus as one divine Person with both a human and divine nature as defined at Chalcedon makes good sense in this context. For, in terms of my revised understanding of a Whiteheadian “society” as a structured field of activity for its constituent actual entities (momentary self-constituting subjects of experience), one can say that Jesus as a divine Person functions within both a strictly divine and a fully human field of activity at the same time. Jesus’ human field of activity as a finite reality is, of course, subordinate to and necessarily part of the infinite field of activity proper to himself as a divine Person. But it still possesses its own ontological integrity as a subordinate field of activity within the larger corporate reality of Jesus as a “structured society,” a “society” made up of interrelated subsocieties/structured fields of activity. Equivalently, then, the divine and the human fields of activity proper to Jesus merge to create a common field of activity in which Jesus can function as a Whiteheadian “structured society”—in effect, a unitary reality rather than a “split personality.”

During his life on earth Jesus in his human nature thus enjoyed normal self-awareness like everyone else, but unconsciously he also participated in the activity proper to the divine Son in the Son’s ongoing intersubjective relationship with the Father and the Spirit. Whitehead’s notion of divine initial aims for actual entities in their process of self-constitution is helpful here. In *Process and Reality* Whitehead says that every actual entity has a “subjective aim” for its self-constitution. “But the initial stage of its aim is an endowment which the entity inherits from the inevitable ordering of things, conceptually realized in the nature of God.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, God gives directionality to the developing actual entity for its self-constitution. I would add that God not only gives directionality but also empowers the developing actual entity to become itself, achieve its self-identity, one way rather than another. Applied to the dogma of the Incarnation, this means that Jesus in his human nature received from the Father at every moment of his earthly life an inspiration or “lure” to act one way rather than another. In principle, he could have said no to this divine proposal, but Christian tradition maintains that he never did so. As a result, he was continually united with himself as the divine Son in responding to the

<sup>35</sup> *ST* 1, q. 29, a. 4 resp.

<sup>36</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 244.

initiative of the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit within the divine communitarian life.

This would seem to be basically in line with Habets's third-article theology of the Holy Spirit as noted above with one important qualification. A third-article theology of the Holy Spirit runs the same danger of overemphasis on the work of one divine Person in the work of salvation as classical Logos Christology. We human beings are not saved by Jesus as the Word incarnate; we are not saved by the invisible work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We are saved by the single conjoint activity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit both in salvation history as a whole and in the lives of each one of us as individuals. Salvation, accordingly, is invariably a corporate reality both in its divine origin and in its consequences for the world of creation, as I argue in the final section of this article.

### Application to a Theology of Creation

In this final part, I indicate how my revision of the category of "society" in Whitehead's metaphysical scheme can also be used to set forth a more socially oriented theology of creation that is grounded in both classical Logos Christology and Habets's understanding of Spirit Christology. A key issue in the current science and religion debate is how God relates to the world and vice-versa. Is God an integral part of the cosmic process or does God exist apart from the cosmic process as its creator? What has been proposed as a compromise position between these two alternatives is the notion of panentheism, that is, that creation exists within God but retains its own identity as distinct from God. But how does one then explain such a nondual relationship between God and the world? The standard answer is that God is the "soul" of the universe, and the universe is the "body" of God, so that together God and the world are one unitary reality.<sup>37</sup> But this metaphor suffers from making God too dependent on the world for God's *raison d'être* and reducing everything in this world to God's body parts.<sup>38</sup> Yet if one adopts my revision of Whitehead's notion of "society" as a structured field of activity for its constituent actual entities at any given moment, and if one likewise concedes that fields unlike Aristotelian substances can be layered within one another in an ascending hierarchy of more and more comprehensive fields of activity, then one has both a philosophical explanation for the idea of panentheism and the rational basis for a socially oriented theology of creation. Since I have written extensively on

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Charles Hartshorne, "The Compound Individual," in *Philosophical Essays for Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. F. S. C. Northrup (New York: Russell & Russell, 1936) 193–220; and Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 69–78.

<sup>38</sup> McFague, *Models of God* 71–76.

this topic in previous publications,<sup>39</sup> I content myself with the summary statement that the world of creation is an ascending hierarchy of fields within fields, all of which exist within the all-comprehensive field of activity proper to the three divine Persons in their ongoing trinitarian relationship to one another. The usefulness of this imaginative philosophical vision of the God-world relationship for more specialized work in Christology can perhaps best be made clear by using it to deal with a particularly vexing question in the classical tradition.

How is one to understand the various meanings attached to the term “body of Christ” within Christian theology? For there clearly are differences between what we understand by the physical body of Christ during his earthly life, his risen body after the resurrection, his consecrated body in the eucharistic liturgy, and his Mystical Body as described by Paul in Ephesians and Colossians. The common denominator in all these expressions is evidently “body,” but what do we mean by “body”? In Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, “body” is linked with “soul” to indicate the ontological unity of a physical substance. As such, it applies primarily to the earthly body of Jesus and, perhaps with some qualifications, to his risen body. But the application to the Eucharist is somewhat strained since the physical appearances of the consecrated bread and wine remain that of bread and wine, not of a physical human body. The application of the term “Mystical Body of Christ” to the church is even more strained since the correlation with a physical body is altogether missing.

Within a revised understanding of a Whiteheadian “society” as a structured field of activity for its constituent actual entities or momentary self-constituting subjects of experience, however, the term “Body of Christ” has a single generic meaning in each of the above-named instances. It is invariably a Whiteheadian “structured society,” or a society composed of subordinate societies or nexuses of interrelated subjects of experience. Such is the case with the earthly body of Jesus as a normal physical organism, namely, a dynamic unity of interrelated parts or members, each of which follows its own individual pattern or mode of operation. Such would also seem to be the case for the risen body of Jesus insofar as he appears to his disciples as somewhat different but still basically the same as in his earthly life. For, as explained above in setting forth a Spirit Christology consistent with classical Logos Christology, Jesus in his human nature after the resurrection was even more fully incorporated into the communitarian life of the

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Joseph A. Bracken, *The One in the Many: A Contemporary Reconstruction of the God-World Relationship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001); *Christianity and Process Thought* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation, 2006); and *Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Intersubjectivity: A New Paradigm for Religion and Science* (West Conshohocken, Pa.: Templeton Foundation, 2009).

Trinity, sharing with the Father and the Spirit in the conjoint activity of divine self-giving love. As a consequence, one would expect that the physical body of Jesus would be released from all the limitations of earthly life in the body. In particular, he should be able first to appear to his disciples unexpectedly and then to disappear just as suddenly. So it is not surprising that he is described exactly that way in the Gospels after his resurrection. While he is still human, he is clearly not exactly the same Jesus as he was before the resurrection. In his appearances to disciples and friends after the resurrection, he is not immediately recognized (see, e.g., Lk 24:16; Jn 20:14), and in some cases he is not accepted as really present (Mt 28:17). From a Whiteheadian perspective, however, this is not surprising: the risen Jesus is a “structured society” or society composed of two subsocieties/structured fields of activity. After his resurrection the field of activity representing his human nature was more closely incorporated into the field of activity corresponding to his divine nature but without losing its own ontological integrity as part of a structured society. Hence, one would expect Jesus to look somewhat different after the resurrection.

Likewise, from this neo-Whiteheadian perspective, consecrated bread and wine have to be seen as each a Whiteheadian structured society since they both have an underlying molecular organization that can be analyzed with the aid of a microscope. Jesus is present in the consecrated bread and wine primarily in virtue of his divinity, the structured field of activity proper to his divine nature, and only secondarily in virtue of his humanity, the more limited structured field of activity proper to his human nature. Only in this way can he be simultaneously present everywhere in the world where the eucharistic liturgy is celebrated.

Finally, with respect to the whole of creation as the Mystical Body of Christ, it too can be understood as a Whiteheadian “structured society” within the field of activity proper to all three divine Persons but especially to Jesus as the Word incarnate. Yet, in line with the intent of the Spirit Christology of Habets and others, the Holy Spirit should be considered as the “soul” or animating principle of the Mystical Body and the Father as the originating principle, the ontological source from which divine self-giving love initially flows and to which it ultimately returns through the response to that love on the part of Christ as the head and creation as his Mystical Body. All of creation, in other words, but especially human beings through their church-related link with the risen Jesus, can in this way participate in the communitarian life of the divine Persons in their single conjoint act of self-giving love for one another and all their creatures. This happens even now, of course, but it will be fully evident only at the end of the world or at least of our current cosmic epoch.

To sum up, I have tried to make clear the value of a socially oriented metaphysics as opposed to a more individualistic Aristotelian-Thomistic

metaphysics for explaining the theoretical implications of a Spirit Christology such as Habets presents in his *The Anointed Son*. At the same time, it is important to realize that any metaphysical system will be limited in its ability to explain the full panoply of Christian beliefs. So one should be ready to admit the limitations of one's own favored metaphysical scheme and at the same time be ready to modify that scheme as needed in the light of the insights of other metaphysical alternatives or possibly new research into the history of various Christian beliefs. Certainly for those committed to a process-oriented approach to reality, their metaphysical scheme should be open to revision; it should be an open-ended system or a work still in progress within a broader communitarian setting.

### APPENDIX

Stanley Grenz in his *The Named God and the Question of Being*, written shortly before his untimely death in 2005, proposes a methodological hypothesis directly opposed to my own in this article. I will summarize his hypothesis and then comment on why I oppose its use. Grenz claims that the synthesis of the concepts of God and being in classical metaphysics has been undermined in the 20th century by the accusation of logocentrism/onto-theology first raised by Martin Heidegger and then further developed by deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida.<sup>40</sup> Being, in other words, has been mistakenly identified with God as the Supreme Being. As a result, classical metaphysics which thus confuses God and being, must be considered dead and without hope of revivification. Grenz accepts this "demise" of the classical concept of being but claims that the notion of being can be reprimed if one grounds further reflection on what is meant by being not in philosophy but in trinitarian theology as found in the New Testament and in the apophatic tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy and Western mysticism. Onto-theology, therefore, should be replaced by "theo-ontology" if the notion of being is to survive and flourish once again.<sup>41</sup>

While I am impressed by the breadth of Grenz's overview in part one, "The Saga of Being," particularly the sections subtitled "The Christianization of Being in the Middle Ages," "The Secularization of Being in the Early Modern Era," and "The Demise of Being,"<sup>42</sup> I am less inclined to agree that the notion of being has been discredited. This metaphysical category may need rethinking in terms of the evolutionary understanding of reality that is commonly accepted in contemporary science. More emphasis should then be placed on the emergence of new forms or essences in a process-oriented context as opposed to the classical presupposition

<sup>40</sup> Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being* 8, 130.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 250, 292. <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 15–130.



of a relatively stable world with unchanging forms or essences. But some notion of being, what it means to be or to exist, seems to be foundational for any consistent worldview. Grenz likewise highly prizes the notion of being. But, as already noted, he wants to derive the philosophical notion of being from theology, the Christian understanding of God as triune insofar as the latter likewise illuminates what is meant by being, above all, human being.<sup>43</sup> For me, this move is questionable since metaphysics is generally thought to provide a plausible rational foundation for the empirical laws of nature as well as for belief in the transempirical reality of God. Hence, metaphysics, as opposed to theology, should be grounded in strictly rational reflection accessible to human beings of various religious persuasions and not in an alleged divine revelation within one such religious tradition.

At the same time I agree with Grenz that God by definition is incomprehensible, a transempirical reality beyond our human ability to understand fully.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the God-world relationship can never be captured in its fullness by any human thought system. So, in line with contemporary scientific method, I believe that one should offer an explanation for the nature of the God-world relationship simply in terms of models or symbolic representations of what by definition cannot be directly verified. For, in this way one respects the incomprehensibility of God even as one seeks to construct a coherent worldview. As Ian Barbour remarked years ago, models should be taken seriously, but not literally.<sup>45</sup> They may be true in one respect, but not in others. Hence, in theology as in natural science, there are no definitive models of the transempirical dimensions of reality. Sooner or later, every model is superseded by another model that is more rationally coherent or more consistent with empirical data.

Moreover, while Grenz is quite critical of the related notions of onto-theology and logocentrism, I prefer to think of these new proposals in contemporary philosophy as an opportunity to think more deeply about the age-old philosophical problem of the relation between the one and the many.<sup>46</sup> Evidently the classical Platonic understanding of the one and the many wherein the one transcends the many as their ontological principle of order and intelligibility is no longer satisfactory for Heidegger, Derrida, and others. But what new model of that relationship do they put in its place? None is immediately apparent. Heidegger still seems to favor the notion of being as a unitary reality that unexpectedly reveals itself in

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 342–73.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 320–27.

<sup>45</sup> Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 117.

<sup>46</sup> See Joseph A. Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Intersubjectivity: A New Paradigm for Religion and Science* (West Conshohocken, Pa.: Templeton Foundation, 2009) 3–8.

particular events (*Erignisse*).<sup>47</sup> Derrida seems to focus on the sheer plurality of the many. Yet, as indicated elsewhere,<sup>48</sup> his notion of *différance* as the systematic play of differences within language seems to imply the basic interconnection of these differences and thus a new but still undefined notion of the one. My own suggestion would be that Derrida in particular but also Heidegger in a more general way both seem to think of being as an activity rather than an entity, a verb rather than a noun, a potentiality that becomes actual only in its entitative instantiations. If so, then both Derrida and Heidegger could have profited from Whitehead's notion of *creativity*, which he describes as "the universal of universals, characterizing ultimate matter of fact,"<sup>49</sup> that is, the metaphysical principle of process whereby "the many become one and are increased by one."<sup>50</sup> Neither the one nor the many, accordingly, enjoys ontological priority over the other; as strictly interdependent realities, both are needed to explain the notion of being in an evolutionary, process-oriented context. From this purely philosophical reflection, one can then move to Christian theology, the study of the triune God and a trinitarian understanding of the God-world relationship (including a Spirit Christology) such as I have sketched in this article.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 107–23.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., *The One in the Many: A Contemporary Reconstruction of the God-World Relationship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001) 81–94.

<sup>49</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 21.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.