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Trinity, Temporality, and Open Theism

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Abstract A number of thinkers today, including open theists, find reasons to attribute temporality to God. According to Robert W. Jenson, the Trinity is indispensable to a Christian concept of God, and divine temporality is essential to the meaning of the Trinity. Following the lead of early Christian thought, Jenson argues that the "persons" of the Trinity are relations, and these relations are temporal. Jenson's insights are obscured, however, by problematic references to time as a sphere to which God is related. Schubert M. Ogden gives the notion of divine temporality coherent content by arguing that God's actuality is best understood as an unending succession of experiences. This paper was delivered in the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

Keywords Open theism · Trinity · Temporality · God · Time · Divine relatedness · Process theism

In the book that gave its name to this version of theism, the openness of God represents the work of several conservative Christians who share the conviction that an interactive view of God is more faithful to the biblical portrayals of the divine reality than the prevalent alternatives.[1] Open theists find support in numerous biblical passages for the idea that God not only affects the world, but also the world has an effect on God, and that the interaction between God and creation takes the form of an ongoing historical drama. In the years that followed that publication, open theists have found their proposal questioned and challenged, with varying degrees of intensity, across a broad front of exegetical, theological and philosophical issues.

[1]Pinnock, C., Rice, R., Sanders, J., & Hasker W. (1994). *The openness of God: A biblical challenge to the traditional understanding of God.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity)

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A number of Christian thinkers have raised serious questions about the biblical support for open theism. Reactions from this direction typically focus on two corollaries of open theism: that God does not control the course of events absolutely and that God does not enjoy exhaustive, or absolute, foreknowledge.

While embracing an interactive view of God, open theists also adhere to two important features of traditional Christian theism, namely, that the world is not necessary to God and that God participates in the world's events directly as well as indirectly—in ways indicated by expressions such as "intervention" and "miracle". Both concepts raise philosophical questions about such issues as the nature of time, the meaning of freedom, and the content of divine action.

Along with exegetical and philosophical questions, open theism also raises questions of a more specifically doctrinal or theological nature. Open theists agree with process thought that God's experience is inherently interactive and temporal. On the other hand, they agree with traditional theism that the relation between God and world is asymmetrical—that the world needs God in a way that God does not need the world. The question therefore arises as to how one might conceive of divine temporality without a temporal world for God to experience.

The resurgence of Trinitarian thought in recent decades provides a possible resource for dealing with this issue. The work of Robert W. Jenson, in particular, is notable for the way it connects Trinity and temporality. And when corrected at a crucial juncture, I believe it provides, or at least suggests, ways for open theists to develop an answer to the question of divine experience.[2]

Divine Temporality Affirmed

For Jenson, as for other theologians who accept "Rahner's Rule", the events to which the biblical record bears witness, the acts of God in history, bring to expression the inner nature of the divine reality.[3] God for us is just what God is in him/herself. And since it arises from the threefold manifestation of God in history, the Trinitarian portrait presents us with a God who is inherently related to time.

Jenson develops this position from a careful analysis of early Trinitarian thought. He agrees with the familiar observation that Christian theology emerged from the encounter between biblical religion and the thought-world of late antiquity. But instead of fusing the Gospel with Greek culture, he argues, early Christian thinkers deliberately refused to do so. Accordingly, the doctrine of the Trinity is not the product of Hellenic influence; it is the fruit of resisting Hellenic influence.[4]

As Jenson describes it, the critical difference between Christianity and Hellenism involved divergent views of time. At its heart, Greek religion was a quest for something that could resist the flow of time, for an aspect of reality impervious to change. The gods' one defining characteristic was therefore immortality, immunity to destruction, and the true object of Greek religion was Timelessness as such. (Think of Zeus conquering Chronos.)

[2] Jenson develops his views on the Trinity primarily in two major projects. Jenson, R. W. (1982). *The triune identity: God according to the gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress), and Jenson, R. W. (1997–1999). *Systematic theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press).

[3] Cf. Jenson, *Triune identity,* 139, 157. Karl Rahner's familiar maxim, "the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity," has become a virtual mantra for recent Trinitarian thought. (1970). *The trinity.* Trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder), 22.

[4] Cf. *The triune identity*, 34.

Biblical thought could not have been more different. While the Greeks insisted that divinity wasn't involved in time, the Hebrews insisted that it was. And instead of conceiving of eternity as abstraction from time, they viewed God's eternity as faithfulness through time.[5]

Nevertheless, the Greek vision of things had a profound influence on early Christology. Christians who accepted the Hellenistic assumption that the divine is impervious to time were left with an enormous gap between God and the world, and they located Christ in this space. Consequently, they viewed the Son, the logos, as inferior to God—an originated being, though nevertheless "God of a sort".[6] Arius, for example, concluded that "the Son is not unoriginated, nor is he in any part of the Unoriginated". Accordingly, Arius said, "There was once when he [the Logos] was not". And because Christ is involved with time he cannot really be God. The Logos may be God for *us*, but it cannot be God in him/herself.[7]

The doctrine of the Trinity developed in reaction to the idea that God is timeless and the logos must therefore be inferior to God. Its objective was to affirm both Christ's full divinity and God's intimate connection with temporal, creaturely reality. As expressed by Athanasius and confirmed by the council of Nicaea, the Father–Son relation is internal to God's being: God is God precisely in relatedness. Later in the 4th century, the Cappadocian fathers solidified God's relationality by eliminating subordinationism. In this way, Father and Son could be one God without ranking them ontologically.[8]

More of this would take us too deeply into the intricacies of Trinitarian reflection than we can afford to go here, but the central point is clear. God is inherently relational. The expression, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit", names the one God and identifies God as having deity in a complex and interactive way.[9] Furthermore, as God is thus conceived, there is no distance between him/her and us that needs to be overcome. "Each of the Trinitarian relations is an affirmation that as God works creatively among us, so he is in himself."[10]

Furthermore, there is a "tensed" quality to the divine relations. Salvation history comprises the manifestations of a divine reality, all of which is involved in each great act. Unlike the Greek view that God's self-identity is immune to all outside influence, leaving him/her changeless and impassible, the Trinity imputes change, dynamism to God.

If this is really what the Trinity is about, then why all the confusion that surrounds the doctrine? Because, says Jenson, virtually all of the insights of the Eastern fathers were lost when the Trinity came to the West. Confused by their terminology, Western theologians employed what they thought were Latin equivalents (but weren't) in a way that not only obscured but distorted the Cappadocians' intent. And they set Western thought on a course that renders the Trinity incomprehensible and clearly at odds with the biblical portrait of God.

The central culprit in this story was Augustine, who attributed to God the very characteristics of Greek ontology that the Cappadocians sought to overcome. They wanted to show that God is intimately related to temporal creation; Augustine wanted to show what God is in himself, apart from creation. For the Cappadocians, God is complex: it is precisely the togetherness of the identities that constitutes God. But for Augustine, God is simple; each identity possesses an abstract divine essence in exactly the same way, so the

[5] Ibid., 59, 58.

[6] Ibid., 79.

[7] Ibid., 81–82.

[8] Ibid., 89–90.

[9] Ibid., 112.

[10] Ibid., 107.

distinctions among them are lost. The Nicenes called the Trinity God *because* of the triune relations and differences; Augustine calls the Trinity God *in spite of* them.[11]

With these moves, Augustine severed the Trinity from its anchor in salvation history and cast it adrift on a sea of speculation. When you think of God, Augustine maintains, you think "a greatest and highest substance that transcends all changeable creatures.... And so if I ask, 'Is God changeable or unchangeable?" you will quickly respond..., 'God is changeless'." Here is the essential distinction between creatures and God: "speak of the changes of things, and you find 'was' and 'will be'; think God, and you find 'is' where 'was' and 'will be' cannot enter". God not only does not change, he cannot; just so, "he is rightly said *to be*". God, in other words, is being itself, "he who is".[12] Thus conceived, God is timeless and impassible, untouched and untouchable by the temporal world.[13]

But let us return to Jenson's central point. Only salvation history gives meaning to the Trinitarian language of persons and relations. And if the mighty acts of God are indicative of divine reality, we must conceive of God as inherently and essentially temporal. With this, the edifice of philosophical reflection that insists on divine simplicity, impassibility, and timelessness gives way. Because the name "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" derives its meaning from God's reality in time, the relations that constitute God are "either *temporal* relations or empty verbiage".[14]

Divine Temporality Obscured

Jenson makes a strong case for the view that complexity, relationship, and temporality are intrinsic to the divine life. The mighty acts of God portray what God is, not just what God does in the world. But when Jenson moves from his insistence on divine temporality to an account of God's relation to the temporal world, this essential point seems to evaporate, unless his language betrays his intention.

As we have seen, Jenson follows the Cappadocians, who rejected the Hellenistic view and affirmed God's relation to time. He puts the contrast this way: "Hellenic deity is eternal in that in it circling time has its motionless center; Gregory's God is eternal in that he envelops time, is ahead of and so before it".[15]

[11] Ibid., 119–120.

[12] Ibid., 117–118.

[13] Augustine's Trinitarian meditations were a magnificent mistake, of course. For in his attempt to describe the inner life of the divine, Augustine discovered the inner life of the person and thus began the long journey of introspection that produced our Western concept of the individual. As far as human consciousness is concerned, we are still benefiting from his insights. The emergence of the self in Western thought, as well as its subsequent demise, has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. The most comprehensive discussion to date is no doubt Charles Taylor's magisterial account. Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). A number of works deal with various aspects of the modern and/or postmodern self. Seligman, A. B. (2000). *Modernity's wager: Authority, the self, and transcendence.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). Schrag, C. O. (1997). *The self after postmodernity.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press). An influential sociological study of the self in contemporary America is Bellah, R. Madsen, R., Sullivan, W., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press). In (Westminster John Knox, 2001), Stanley J. Grenz provides an account of the self's long history and proposes a revisionary interpretation of the self that draws on the recent emphases in Trinitarian thought on personness and community. Grenz, S. J. (2001). *The social God and the relational self: A Trinitarian theology of the imago dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox).

[14] *The triune identity*, 125–26 (emphasis his).

[15] *The triune identity*, 165.

But what is the difference between a motionless center and an enveloping reality? They give us different pictures of the God–world relation, to be sure, but in one respect they are strikingly similar. Both envision time as a sphere, a container, or a closed space to which infinity may or may not be related. For the Greeks, God exists apart from this sphere. God is above and beyond it, or immovably centered within it. But God is essentially untouched by it. It contributes nothing to God. The bliss or tranquility of the divine is untroubled by any happening in the realm of finite reality. For Jenson, God chooses to connect with this creaturely, temporal sphere. God is not "above" time; instead, God is "ahead" or "in front of" it, drawing it dynamically forward. But this still treats time as something apart from God's own reality. The creaturely sphere is temporal; in his/her own reality, it seems God is not.

Jenson's separation of God and temporality is further evident in statements like this. "For God to create is for him to *make accommodation* in his triune life for other persons and things.... In himself, he *opens room*, and that act is the event of creation. We call this accommodation in the triune life 'time'."[16] And in this statement, his spatializing of time—and his separation of time from God—is explicit: "In interpreting the reality of time, we could not avoid the language of space. Time ... is the room God makes in his eternity for others than himself".[17]

Jenson thus veers away from the conclusion to which his Trinitarian reflections naturally lead. As he interprets it, the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that something in the inner life of God corresponds to the temporal world. But when he describes the nature of this relationship, his remarks seem to indicate that God is not essentially temporal. Time is the sphere of creaturely existence, a sphere distinct from God. While God is related in some way to the temporal sphere, God's own reality, it seems, is not essentially temporal. The meaning of divine temporality becomes obscure when Jenson describes time as a something which God includes or surrounds, and when he draws a sharp distinction between "created time" and "triune time".[18, 19]

If God is truly temporal, if God acts in history, and God's acts in history reveal God's own reality, then we cannot think of time as a bounded sphere which God may precede, succeed, or envelop. We must find different way to envision it. On this point another line of theistic reflection is helpful. Process thought avoids the pitfalls of spatializing time, and it

[16]"Created time is accommodation in God's eternity for other than God" (*Systematic theology*, 2:25; italics his).

[17]Ibid., 46.

[18]Jenson, *Systematic theology,* 2:345.

[19]We find the same problem in the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Like Jenson, Pannenberg affirms God's relation to history as the key to understanding the divine reality, and, again like Jenson, he affirms the principle that the immanent Trinity is identical to the economic Trinity. But when he describes the ultimate future, he variously identifies it as "the coming of eternity into time," and "the dissolving of time in eternity". Pannenberg, W. (1991–1998). *Systematic theology*, 3 vols. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (3 vols.; Eerdmans) 3:595, 607. In other words, time gives way to timelessness, and temporal succession comes to an end. The final future is not a transition to a continuing life of temporal experiences, but a single, all-encompassing, momentary experience, an endpoint that subsumes the entire course of history that precedes it.

What happens to the divine temporality in the face of assertions like these? It evaporates. Instead of experiencing time sequentially, God experiences all things at once. The divine life is characterized by an "eternal simultaneity," says Pannenberg. "To God all things that were are always present." In the eternity of God, time is "taken up" into "the eternal simultaneity of the divine life" (ibid, 3:607). God exists in "an undivided present" (ibid., 3:630). Whereas creatures are "subject to the march of time," "All things are always present to [God]." "The eternal God has no future ahead of him that is different from his present." (ibid. 1:410).

provides a way for us to think of God not only as genuinely temporal, but also as temporal in a supreme and excellent way.

Divine Temporality Clarified

If God is temporal in the way that the doctrine of the Trinity requires, that is, if God's mighty acts reflect the reality that God truly is, then God's reality must consist of a sequence of experiences.[20]

A familiar objection to this view is that it reduces God to the level of the creatures. Instead of isolating God from the world, as the Greeks did, it goes to the opposite extreme: it immerses God in it and turns God into another version of ourselves.

The assumption here is that temporal passage detracts from God's greatness. If God changed with time, then God could lose value, becoming less than God was before. On the other hand, if God learns or grows over time, then God is always less than God could be. Either account conflicts with the idea of divine perfection—the concept, as Anselm put it, of "a being than which a greater cannot be thought". The challenge, then, is to think of divine temporality as an ongoing series of events in a way that preserves God's generic excellence.

Schubert M. Ogden meets this challenge in an essay entitled, "The Temporality of God".[21] According to Ogden, we can develop an understanding of divine temporality by thoughtfully analyzing our own.[22] Careful reflection reveals that human existence exhibits a twofold character. Each human being embodies, or incarnates, certain characteristics which provide identity over time. These include characteristics that are common to all humans, along with each individual's distinctive physical features and unique qualities of personality and character. But these do not exhaust the content of human existence. Each concrete moment of life presents a person with stimuli which he or she incorporates into a new synthesis of experience. So human existence is essentially "dipolar": it consists of a number of features that are relatively enduring, *and* a sequence of momentary experiences, which include or embody these features.

Similarly, Ogden argues, the being of God exhibits dipolarity. It consists of an ongoing sequence of discrete experiences, each of which includes the various qualities which are unique to the divine reality. On this view, all persons, human and divine, are essentially

[20]The view that time is sequential requires extensive development, which space prevents us from providing here. For a classic discussion of the issues, see Pike, N. (2002). *God and timelessness*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock; reprint edition). For a more recent discussion, see Ganssle, G., & Woodruff, D. (Eds.), (2001). *God and time* (New York: Oxford University Press). William Lane Craig argues for the tensed theory of time endorsed here. Craig, W. L. (2000). Omniscience, tensed facts, and divine eternity. *Faith and Philosophy,17*, 225–241. Richard E. Creel also deals with a wide range of issues connected to the theme of divine eternity. Creel, R. E. (1986). *Divine impassibility: An essay in philosophical theology.* (New York: Cambridge University Press). Creel argues, confusingly, that God's knowledge of the actual world changes but that God is nevertheless changeless in his will and his feeling, as well as in his nature (204–206).

[21]Ogden, S. M. (1966). *The reality of God and other essays* (New York: Harper & Row). In this essay Ogden provides a succinct account of the process view of God and time, which receives its definitive expression in the writings of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *Process and reality: An essay in cosmology* (New York: Macmillan). Hartshorne, C. (1970) *Creative synthesis and philosophic method* (La Salle, IL: Open Court); Hartshorne, C. (1948). *The divine relativity: A social conception of God.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press). Hartshorne, C. (1953). *Reality as social process: Studies in metaphysics and religion.* (New York: Macmillan).

[22]Since our own reality is the best entrée we have to reality as such, human existence gives us an answer to "the ultimate philosophical question of the meaning of being itself" (*The reality of God,* 148).

temporal. They exist as concrete moment-by-moment occasions of experience, each of which has certain defining characteristics.[23] In fact, to have experiences, to have a past and a future, is essential to the reality of anything.[24] God is "an experiencing self who anticipates the future and remembers the past and whose successive occasions of present experience are themselves temporal occurrences".[25]

It is therefore misleading to speak of God as "outside", "above", or "ahead of" time, as if time were a sphere independent of God. Instead, God is inherently temporal. God's life, like all life, consists in a series of momentary experiences,[26] and with this concept the notion of divine temporality acquires coherent meaning.

Does this view of divine temporality compromise God's generic excellence? Does it make God just a larger version of ourselves, one agent alongside others embedded in the flux of temporal passage? Not at all, according to Ogden. We can preserve the qualitative distinction between God and everything else by saying, not that God is atemporal, but that God is supremely temporal.[27] Unlike God, creatures are not only temporal, they are temporary. Their experience begins and ends. In contrast, God's own experience is "everlasting". The sequence of events that constitute God's life is without beginning or end.[28] Accordingly, God's experience, and God's alone, is "eternally temporal".

God is also distinguished from all creaturely reality by the fact God's experience is utterly comprehensive. God responds to everything that exists; each momentary experience encompasses the entire contents of the world. In Ogden's words, "God's distinctiveness [is] not an utter negation of temporality but its supreme exemplification. God's eternity is not sheer timelessness, but an infinite fullness of time".[29] God's experience is thus the perfect and complete register of all that happens in the world. In contrast to the unmoved mover of Aristotelian thought, we should think of God as the "most moved mover",[30] as one who is more sensitive to what happens in the world than anyone or anything else could be.

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[23]This view of things reverses the familiar notion that reality consists of "things," or enduring objects, which "have" experiences. Rather, reality consists of a welter of momentary experiences, some of which share certain qualities with previous experiences and therefore belong to a sequence of events that have sufficient similarity for us to think of them as an enduring object, that is, as a "thing," or a person.

[24]As Ogden puts it, our everyday sense of time is grounded in "a more primal temporality." The truly primary time of our experience is not something we are within, as if it were a container or some sort in which we order the objects of our ordinary external perceptions. Instead, it is "the time constituted by our experiencing itself, as actual occurrence" (*The reality of God*, 151).

[25]Ibid., 152.

[26]Perhaps the best way to express this is to say, not "God is in time," but "time is real for God."

[27]Ibid., 157.

[28]"In the case of God," Ogden argues, "what is distinctive is the complete absence of... temporal finitude and limitation." "God's temporality is not itself temporally determined, so that there is neither a time when God was not yet nor a time when he shall be no more." "God's being has neither begun nor will it end, and the past and future to which he is related in each successive occasion of his present experience can be nothing less than a literally limitless past and future" (ibid., 154).

[29]"In their truly primal forms, temporality and relations structure are constitutive of being itself, and God's uniqueness is to be construed not simply by denying them, but by conceiving them in their infinite mode through the negation of their limitation as we experience them in ourselves" (*The reality of God*, 154). Cf. Whitehead's insistence that God is not the exception to metaphysical principles, but their supreme exemplification (*Process and reality* [Free Press edition, 1959], 405).

[30]This is the title of one of Clark H. Pinnock's books. Pinnock, C. (2001). *Most moved mover: A theology of God's openness.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).

Taken together, the accounts of Robert Jenson and Schubert Ogden provide both reasons for and ways of conceiving divine temporality. For Jenson, the doctrine of the Trinity expresses the fundamental conviction that the mighty acts of God in salvation history reveal God's essential reality. And, to be faithful to this portrait, we must conceive of God as genuinely temporal. For Ogden, divine temporality means that God's experience comprises a sequence of events that has no beginning and no end. So, Jenson makes a persuasive case that the Trinity involves temporality; Schubert M. Ogden provides a helpful concept of temporal experience.[31]

By explaining the sequential nature of God's experience, Ogden helps to clarify Jenson's affirmation of divine temporality. But there is an important respect in which Jenson's Trinitarian view of God corrects what to open theism is a deficiency in Ogden's dipolar theism. For Ogden, as for process theism in general, the ultimate metaphysical fact is God-and-world, not just God. Without a world of beings other than him/herself to experience, God would have no reality. In other words, God needs the world as much as the world needs God. For open theism, however, this conflicts with the historic affirmations of faith that God's existence alone is necessary, and that God creates out of freedom, not out of some sort of necessity.

With his dramatic portrayal of God's inner life as one of complexity, dynamism, and drama, Jenson shows that God is relational not only by virtue of God's connection with the world; God is relational in him/herself. For this reason, we need not think of God in or by him/herself as anomalous, or as "lonely". The Trinitarian life is filled with experience, unimaginable to us in its richness, complexity, and love. Consequently, creation does not meet a deficiency in the divine reality. To the contrary, it freely expresses God's inherent fullness; it extends the inner vitality of God's own life.

[31] For further discussion of the idea that God expresses his innermost life in creation but does not depend on the world for his existence, see Rice, R. (2000). Process theism and the open view of God. In Cobb, J. B., & Pinnock, C. (Eds.), *Searching for an adequate God: A dialogue between process and free will theists* (pp. 163–200). (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).