

Trinity, incarnation and time: a restatement of the doctrine of God in conversation with Robert Jenson

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Abstract

This article engages Robert W. Jenson on the question of the relation between the immanent Trinity and the person Jesus of Nazareth and proposes a restatement of the doctrine of God that takes into account his concerns. I note that many of the criticisms levelled against Jenson are contradictory and offer instead a rearticulation of Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of God, refracted through the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, as a more viable mode of engaging Jenson's ideas. In particular, I suggest an *analogia temporalis* rooted in the divine processions to account for the relationship between time and eternity, thereby showing how Thomas's theology can both accommodate and benefit from many of Jenson's insights, while also avoiding the more serious charges levelled against him.

Keywords: Aquinas, Balthasar, eternity, incarnation, Jenson, Trinity, simplicity

Introduction

God has revealed himself in and as Jesus of Nazareth. With what sort of God, then, have we to do? The question could not be more important, and in response to it Robert W. Jenson has proposed significant revisions in the doctrine of God, attracting no shortage of controversy.¹

¹ Jenson's major works on this front include *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), *Systematic Theology* (2 vols, New York: OUP: 1997, 2001), and *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1992). For the controversy surrounding Jenson's proposals, see Douglas Farrow, David Demson and Joseph Augustine DiNoia, 'Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*: Three Responses', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1/1 (1999), pp. 89–104; George Hunsinger, 'Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*: A Review Essay', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55/2 (2002), pp. 161–200; Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), pp. 68–81. Emmitt Cornelius offers a sympathetic, though critical, appraisal in 'The Concept of Christ's Preexistence in the Trinitarian Theology of Robert W. Jenson: An Exposition and Critique', Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2005.

In the face of this criticism, Jenson has at once maintained his own positions and, at times, argued that he has not been adequately understood.² The cluster of concerns revolves around the relation between the immanent and the economic Trinity, the pre-existence of the Son of God, the relation between time and eternity, and divine freedom. These are serious matters indeed, for distortions in the identification of the saving God will result in distortions in the understanding of the salvation achieved by that God and may even work against that salvation.

In this article, I engage with Jenson's theology, particularly the question of the relation between the immanent Trinity and the incarnation, and make note of the critiques it has generated. I find many of these critiques both perceptive and misguided. In their place, I propose a recovery of the classical notions of divine eternity and simplicity, as articulated by Thomas Aquinas, as a means to both counter the sorts of problems that arise from Jenson's work and as capable of accommodating many of his positive contributions. I further draw from Hans Urs von Balthasar's account of the relation between the immanent and the economic Trinity to propose an *analogia temporalis* in response to Jenson's positing of temporality in God, and to do so without doing away with timeless eternity. My choice of Balthasar is significant for two reasons. First, I see him as developing insights that are latent in Aquinas, but doing so in a way that better accommodates the economically rooted insights upon which Jenson insists. Second (and related to the first), Jenson himself explicitly endorses Balthasar's theology as generally getting it right.³

I do not suggest that such a solution would be fully satisfactory to Jenson. Rather, I endeavour to show how his concerns can be taken into account within the classical doctrine of God. Further, I aim to show that his concerns can help to clarify the classical doctrine of God, including those aspects he discounts. This is, of course, a difficult task, as Jenson specifically rejects those aspects of the classical doctrine that I highlight as solutions to the problem. However, this is not an insuperable problem, as my goal is not to satisfy all of Jenson's concerns, but rather to show how they need not result in abandonment of the classical doctrine.

Robert Jenson and the historically identified God

At the risk of oversimplification, Robert Jenson's project might be summed up as an attempt to properly identify the God of the gospel.⁴ For Jenson,

² Robert W. Jenson, 'Reply to Watson and Hunsinger', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55/2 (2002), p. 231; Robert W. Jenson, 'Once More the *Logos asarkos*', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13/2 (2011), p. 133.

³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 55.

⁴ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, pp. 2–5, 7–13; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 4.

everything hangs on this. The problem, however, is that most theologies work with an unbaptised notion of God,⁵ the inadequately Christian God of Mediterranean pagan antiquity.⁶ In response, Jenson has taken up the mantle of eradicating such theology proper from the church's discourse so that 'the gospel may again be spoken'.⁷ In this section, I briefly survey his efforts to do so.

Jenson, drawing from the history of Israel, specifies the identity of God by a historical event: the Exodus. God is the one who led Israel out of Egypt.⁸ In specifically Christian discourse, a further specification is added to this identification: God is also the one who raised Jesus from the dead. This 'also' is crucial, for it maintains continuity between the God of Israel and the God specified and addressed by Christian speech.⁹ However, it is not simply historical events that identify God. Further specification is needed, and this specification is supplied by narrative. Simply knowing that Jesus is raised does not mean much unless we know who this risen Jesus is. Jenson perceptively suggests that the proclamation "Hitler is risen" would lift few hearts'.¹⁰ It is by the Gospel narratives that the content of Jesus is filled in so that the proclamation of his resurrection might be understood as good news.¹¹

So the resurrection of Christ from the dead is central to the identification of God. This ought to be fairly uncontroversial. However, Jenson does not stop there. Going further, the resurrection of Christ from the dead is central to the identity of God.¹² In other words, for Jenson, what started as the epistemological question of how we can know who the true God is, has become an ontological question of who God himself is. The reasoning behind this move is still epistemologically and soteriologically motivated: 'Were God identified by Israel's Exodus or Jesus' Resurrection, without being identified with them, the identification would be a revelation ontologically other than God himself. The revealing events would be our clues to God, but would not

⁵ For this phrase see Jenson, *Unbaptized God*.

⁶ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, pp. 57–61; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 90–5.

⁷ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 14.

⁸ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, pp. 5–10; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 31, 42–6.

⁹ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–2.

¹² Cornelius, 'Concept of Christ's Preexistence', pp. 17–18; Timo Tavast, 'The Identification of the Triune God: Robert W. Jenson's Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity', *Dialog* 51/2 (2012), p. 160; Anne H. Verhoef, 'The Relation between Creation and Salvation in the Trinitarian Theology of Robert Jenson', *HTS Theologiese Studies* 69/1 (2013), p. 2.

be God.¹³ Jenson takes this even further: it is by raising Jesus from the dead that God constitutes Godself. The resurrection of Christ is itself the divine *ousia*.¹⁴

Where this leads Jenson is to a rigorous identification of the second person of the Trinity and Jesus of Nazareth. His theology has no place for an unincarnate ‘ontological double’ for Jesus.¹⁵ Jesus is the Son of God because of a filial relationship to the Father, not because of some relationship to the Second Person of the Trinity. Jesus is that Second Person. Mary gave birth to the Son of God, full stop.¹⁶ We might say that in identifying Jesus with the eternal Son, Jenson has done so without remainder. Any perceived gap between the two, any hint of an abstraction from the incarnate Son smacks of un-Nicene subordinationism or modalism, so far as Jenson is concerned.¹⁷

To fully understand what Jenson is getting at here, we must note his doctrine of divine eternity. According to Jenson, it is an unbaptised, pagan notion of God that views his eternity as mere timelessness.¹⁸ While Jenson believes it is primarily a linguistic matter whether one speaks of divine ‘time’ in God,¹⁹ the Hellenistic doctrine of eternity, with its desire to protect God from temporal contingencies and the vicissitudes of history is at loggerheads with the God who identifies himself with the historical event of Christ’s resurrection.²⁰ Rather than mere timelessness, Jenson identifies eternity with the divine life shared by Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²¹

This divine eternity, which Jenson winds up terming ‘God’s time’, embraces and contains within itself our finite, created time.²² ‘The true God’, writes Jenson, ‘is not eternal because he lacks time, but because he takes time.’²³ God’s eternity is a temporal infinity, lacking any of the limitations that we experience with regard to time.²⁴ For God, the past does not recede, nor does the future approach. Nevertheless the divine eternity,

¹³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 59.

¹⁴ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, p. 168. This was drawn to my attention by Cornelius, ‘Concept of Christ’s Preexistence’, p. 128.

¹⁵ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, p. 156.

¹⁶ Jenson, ‘*Logos asarkos*’, p. 130; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 126–7.

¹⁷ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 95–100, 103.

¹⁸ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, p. 25; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 94, 110, 113. See also Cornelius, ‘Concept of Christ’s Preexistence’, pp. 24, 48–9; Tavast, ‘Identification of the Triune God’, p. 158.

¹⁹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 218.

²⁰ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, 25; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 94.

²¹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 138–40.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 226; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 34–5 (35).

²³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 217.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 216–18; Jenson, *Triune Identity*, pp. 176–7.

because it is a life, which for Jenson means a narrative, flows irreversibly in one direction: from the Father through the Son and to the Holy Spirit.²⁵

Indeed, Jenson identifies the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as God's past, present and future, respectively.²⁶ The act of creation is an accommodation of created time within the divine time, and the Son, whose present mediates between past (Father) and future (Spirit), holds open a place for creatures in this divine history.²⁷ Recall, though, that for Jenson, the Son is not other than the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. What this means, then, is that a historical figure is – precisely as a historical figure – an identity of the eternal divine life. This makes sense of how it is that the Son holds open the space for creatures. How, though, does it account for the Son's eternity?

One of Jenson's most controversial proposals has been to do away entirely with any notion of a *Logos asarkos* as the identity of the eternal Son of God. The man Jesus of Nazareth, born of the Virgin, crucified under Pilate, raised and ascended is the Son of God. He is the Son of God because the Father constitutes him as such. While Jenson would not deny the hypostatic union, he is very critical of Logos and two-natures christologies, and he refuses to see Jesus's sonship as a function of his relation to the Logos rather than the Father.²⁸ He affirms Christ's pre-existence, but in a novel way, for the pre-existence cannot be other than the man Jesus. Jenson proposes a pattern of movement towards the incarnation as Jesus's pre-existence. Through the people of Israel, through various theophanies, Jesus is moving towards his incarnate birth.²⁹

However, it is not Christ's pre-existence that demands most of Jenson's attention, but rather what he terms Christ's 'postexistence'. It is in the eschaton that the human Jesus is fully specifiable as the eternal Son of the Father. Moreover, it is in the eschaton that the immanent Trinity will be most fully itself.³⁰ Consonant with Jenson's other emphases, Jesus' sonship is established by the resurrection, a move grounded in a particular exegesis of Romans 1:4–5.³¹ So by his resurrection by the power of the Holy

²⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 218.

²⁶ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, p. 24.

²⁷ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 27.

²⁸ Jenson, 'Logos asarkos', 130; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 126–7.

²⁹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 141. Note Cornelius's criticism of the adequacy and coherence of this position in 'Concept of Christ's Preexistence', pp. 195–229.

³⁰ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, pp. 140–1. See also Cornelius, 'Concept of Christ's Preexistence', p. 114.

³¹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 142–3.

Spirit (who is God's own future), a 'hole opens in the event of the End', in which the eternally postexistent Son is established in the fullness of his glory.³² What is particularly interesting, though, is that Jenson sees the Son's filial relationship to the Father as established not only at the resurrection, but also at the baptism, and at the conception (the latter of which must be the case to avoid any sort of adoptionism). Moreover, all of these events are themselves the eternal establishment of the relationship between Father and Son.³³ This, Jenson notes '[undoes] our ordinary notion of how time works', and demands that we have recourse to the Holy Spirit, who 'structures time as God's occasions may demand it. Thus at Jesus' baptism, the Spirit mediates between the Father and the Son in this sense: he makes the Father's eternal address and Jesus' temporal arising from the water coincidental.'³⁴

One final piece must be laid in place to complete this overview of Jenson's project. In explicating his notion of divinity and of eternity, Jenson has frequent recourse to the Cappadocians, whose theology he vastly prefers to Augustine's.³⁵ It was they who gave the Nicene doctrine of consubstantiality a coherent articulation.³⁶ Their solution to the conundrum of how three hypostases can constitute one God, according to Jenson, is that the predicate God refers to the shared life of these three, rather than to some *ousia* conceived as a substratum to the hypostases. *Homoousios*, for the Cappadocians refers to the notion of inseparable operations. The hypostases share the same work in an undivided manner according to their respective *tropoi hyparxeos*. Jenson appeals to Gregory of Nazianzus, who 'Instead of comparing Father, Son, and Spirit to the sun and its beams . . . compared them to three suns, so focused as to make but one beam: the beam is God.'³⁷ So then, on Jenson's view, the Cappadocians allow him to posit this temporally extended history as the one eternal God because this history is the single life lived by these three. The bookends of protology and eschatology find their centre point in the mutual action of the Trinity in Christ's resurrection. This is the beam that is the one God.

³² Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 85.

³³ Robert W. Jenson, 'Jesus in the Trinity', *Pro Ecclesia* 8/3 (1999), pp. 105–6.

³⁴ Jenson, 'Jesus in the Trinity', pp. 106–7.

³⁵ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, pp. 103–20; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 105–14. Note, however, George Hunsinger's criticism of this pitting Augustine against the Cappadocians, which he grounds in the patristics scholarship of Michel Barnes and Lewis Ayres, 'Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*', pp. 187–92.

³⁶ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 104–6; Jenson, *Triune Identity*, pp. 106–7.

³⁷ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, p. 113.

Critiques of Jenson

What, then, are we to make of such a theology? Criticisms of Jenson's theology have been numerous and contradictory. George Hunsinger has suggested that Jenson's christology has tendencies in the seemingly opposite directions of monophysitism (because of its lack of a divine Son conceived of otherwise than the man Jesus), adoptionism (because of the constitutive character of the resurrection) and Arianism (because of the temporal beginning of the Son who is Jesus).³⁸ However, it must be noted that Hunsinger sees these only as tendencies and that Jenson believes Hunsinger has fundamentally missed the point.³⁹ Of more weight is Hunsinger's observation that Jenson's reading of the Cappadocians tends towards tritheism. Making God a predicate need not lead to tritheism. However, by dispensing with divine simplicity, as Jenson does (motivated by a desire to preserve real distinctions and 'eventful differentiations' in the divine life),⁴⁰ there is no real reason for this to be anything other than tritheism except for Jenson's will to remain faithful to Nicene Christianity.⁴¹ This will to faithfulness ought not to be discounted. However, the logical problems are most certainly there. For simplicity ensures that the divine distinctions and differentiations are not compositions into which God might be broken down. In the case of three divine hypostases, such a composition would seem to inevitably lead to tritheism.

On the other hand, Francesca Murphy suggests that Jenson's emphasis on succession among the hypostases tends more towards modalism than tritheism.⁴² Once more we must note that Jenson explicitly repudiates modalism and that his distinctive doctrine of the Trinity is meant to avoid it.⁴³ In the face of both these charges – tritheism and modalism – I am inclined to take Jenson at his word and grant a greater weight to his will to Nicene orthodoxy than to the logical entailments of his arguments. What is interesting for my purposes is the fact that both of these seemingly incompatible criticisms can be levelled against Jenson. Clearly he is difficult to classify. And this ought to give his more vociferous critics pause before they begin their heresiological catalogues of his work.

The other problem area for Jenson is a potentially inadequate account of divine freedom. Put simply, if God becomes the God he is through the

³⁸ Hunsinger, 'Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*', pp. 167–74.

³⁹ Jenson, 'Response to Watson and Hunsinger', p. 231.

⁴⁰ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 104–13.

⁴¹ Hunsinger, 'Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*', pp. 187–92.

⁴² Francesca Aran Murphy, *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp. 263–8.

⁴³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 95–100, 103.

historical process, if one of the trinitarian hypostases has no identity other than as a historical, created figure, and is made such by his resurrection from the dead, then has not creation (and for that matter, redemption) become necessary for the being of God? Was it Hegel who performed the baptism for Jenson's notion of God?⁴⁴ Jenson himself attempts to hold onto the divine freedom with statements to the effect that God could have been the same God he is without the creation, without Christ's death and resurrection, but that beyond this 'we must resolutely say no more. About how God could as the same God have been other than Jesus the Son and his Father and their Spirit, or about what that would have been like, we can know or guess nothing whatsoever.'⁴⁵ This would seem to allow for maintaining the contingency of creation and the gratuity of redemption, and thereby God's freedom in both. Recently, Jenson has distanced himself from these earlier statements, though, reckoning them even more epistemologically nugatory than he previously had.⁴⁶

Despite these adjustments, David Bentley Hart insists that the logical implications are still there and still valid, no matter how much Jenson may protest.⁴⁷ Moreover:

it is simply *prima facie* false that if God achieves his identity in the manner Jenson describes, he could have been the same God by other means, without the world . . . If . . . the particular determinations of history are also determinations of God – as he 'chooses' to be God – then there can be no identity of God as *this* God apart from the specific contours of *this* history.⁴⁸

In other words, given Jenson's commitments, God could be another God without the creation's history, but not *this* God. Indeed, Jenson's attempts to safeguard the divine freedom are more along the lines of voluntarism, according to Hart.⁴⁹ God determining himself as a 'voluntarist *causa sui*', particularly when coupled with the world-historical stage as essential to God's being, raises all sorts of morally outrageous possibilities, as the bloody sweep of history becomes the outworking of a divine project of self-discovery.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ This particular way of putting the matter is Hunsinger's, 'Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*', p. 175.

⁴⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 141.

⁴⁶ Jenson, 'Logos *asarkos*', p. 131.

⁴⁷ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 157.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 162–3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 162–3, 166.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 164–6.

Once more, though, these are strange criticisms. Voluntarism and a Hegelian loss of freedom are opposites. While I do have reservations about Jenson's proposals, I find the approach of his critics problematic as well, and believe a different sort of engagement is in order and will prove to be more fruitful.

Solution: the eternally simple God

The problems identified in Jenson's theology seem to be opposites. Is God too unitary in this accounting or too multiplex? Has God too much freedom or not enough? The criticisms of Jenson as tritheist and modalist, as Hegelian and voluntarist, seem to be mutually incompatible, and therefore unfair. In this section I undertake a retrieval of two components of the classical doctrine of God (as articulated by Thomas Aquinas) that I believe allow us to engage more fruitfully with Jenson's thought, integrating his positive insights and avoiding the problems identified by his critics. They are a Boethian notion of eternity and the doctrine of divine simplicity.

In question 10 of the *Summa Theologiae's* *Prima Pars*, Thomas Aquinas adopts the following definition of eternity from Boethius: 'Eternity is the simultaneously whole and complete possession of interminable life.'⁵¹ Going further, in the next article, Thomas affirms that God 'is his own eternity', because life and *esse* are one in him.⁵² This is significant because it means that Aquinas is not working with a purely negative concept. Indeed, it might be better to say that he is not working with a concept at all. Eternity as a concept is an abstraction from God himself, and while this conceptual abstraction is helpful, it must be remembered that eternity is not anything other than God. For were eternity distinct from God, there would be another principle other than God, transcending the universe of space and time, and predicating eternity of God would determine God with reference to this other principle. Therefore, we must posit a positive content of eternity, which is the divine life.

Thus far, Jenson would agree. Finding neither an infinitely extended 'time line' (Aristotle) nor 'a timeless point from which all points on the time line are equidistant' (Plato) adequate, he instead affirms: 'The triune God's eternity is precisely the infinity of the life that the Son, who is Jesus the Christ, lives with his Father in their Spirit.'⁵³ As Wolfhart Pannenberg writes, it is only the triune life of God that allows Boethian definition of eternity as the full possession of life to be fully realised.⁵⁴ However, Jenson departs from

⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter ST), I.10.1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, I.10.2.

⁵³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 140–1.

⁵⁴ Pannenberg, 'Eternity, Time, and the Trinitarian God', in C. E. Gunton (ed.), *Trinity, Time, and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 70. Pannenberg

Aquinas in that he believes that some notion of time needs to be posited in God. It was a mistake, he thinks, to have a strict opposition between time and eternity such that eternity is a purely negative and timeless concept.⁵⁵ While recognising that it is more a 'linguistic' question than anything else, Jenson eventually opts to posit a divine time for God as distinct from created time. This divine time embraces and includes created time.⁵⁶ As we have seen, Jenson has highly emphasised the eschatological dimensions of God's eternity. It is primarily as our future that God's eternity meets us.⁵⁷

So, then, should we follow Jenson and posit time in God? My contention is that the answer is no. However, a notion of eternity as timeless is also able to accommodate and benefit from a good deal of what Jenson proposes with regard to temporality in God without requiring us to posit time in God. I should note that my defence of timeless eternity for God is not motivated by a desire to protect God's dignity from the vicissitudes of temporal corruption, but rather to uphold God as the creator of spatio-temporal reality. The universe consists of space and time, and time is intimately bound up with space. In some ways they are the same thing. So in positing a timeless eternity for God, there is no desire to protect God from time, rather the motive is to maintain that God is the creator. Thus far, Jenson would agree. Time is created.⁵⁸

Moreover, by identifying life with eternity, Boethius does not suffer from the relationship of strict opposition between time and eternity that Jenson castigates. His definition protects us from thinking of God as a frozen, unmoved, unmovable deity. It allows for the liveliness of God. And Jenson's historicisation and particularly his eschatological emphasis does us the favour of making this more clear. It is equally valid, on this notion of eternity, to envision it as the oncoming of a future. Indeed, it is hard to account for

identifies this notion of eternity as 'Plotinian', however, the definition is the same as the one Aquinas cites from Boethius. The connection with Pannenberg is particularly interesting. Pannenberg has undoubtedly had a profound influence on Jenson, particularly in the future-oriented cast of his work. In this particular essay, Pannenberg notes that he differs slightly from Aquinas's axiom that God is his own *esse*, by positing God as 'his own future' (pp. 68–9), a phrase which Jenson picks up (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 157). What I am suggesting here is that, given a proper understanding of Aquinas's identification of eternity with God's life, Pannenberg's move need not be seen as a difference.

⁵⁵ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, p. 25; Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 94. But see Douglas Farrow's criticism that this 'is not the root of the timelessness axiom it is meant to be' ('Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*', pp. 92–3).

⁵⁶ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 55, 226.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 217; Jenson, *Triune Identity*, pp. 177, 180, 182.

⁵⁸ Stated most clearly in Jenson, '*Logos asarkos*', p. 133.

Jenson's statement that Christ's sonship is constituted by his resurrection, baptism and conception, all of which are coincident with the Father's eternal address, apart from a conception of eternity like this.⁵⁹ However, we must also recognise that all of these notions: frozen, unmoved, static, dynamic are spatial metaphors. It is essentially impossible to think without (another spatial metaphor) them.⁶⁰ However, they are inherently limited. Where do we conceive of God as being statically frozen? To where would we like to imagine God dynamically moving?

God's genuine transcendence might be expressed only spatially, but it is not such.⁶¹ Rather God is everywhere because God is nowhere. God's immanence is a function of his transcendence. Similarly, just as we confess God to be omnipresent, without thereby spatially binding him up, confessing a timeless eternity for God does not thereby render him foreign to time or time foreign to him. Indeed, Aquinas affirms that eternity is a whole and therefore contains in itself all moments of time.⁶² Therefore eternity can coincide with this temporal history (though in the mode proper to eternity).

While the notion of eternity excludes a beginning and an end, it does not necessarily exclude what Robert Jenson terms, 'eventful distinction',⁶³ or the possibility that the divine life might come to be in historically novel ways.⁶⁴ However, all notions such as duration, or moments, must be recognised as sharing the character of the container metaphor. They may be indispensable for thematising the reality in question, but they mislead if we take them 'literally'.

So then, eternity as timeless does not result in a strict opposition between time and eternity. Time is not utterly foreign to God. Rather, there must be some correspondence, as God is the ontological ground of all that is, which must include time. As I shall show, the basic insight is present in Aquinas, yet I believe that Hans Urs von Balthasar's articulation of the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity might help us think through this more clearly. Balthasar, developing Thomistic insights, posits creation's condition

⁵⁹ Robert W Jenson, 'Conceptus . . . De Spiritu Sancto', *Pro Ecclesia* 15/1 (2006), pp. 105–6.

⁶⁰ On the basic and constitutive character of the container metaphor for human cognition see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 30–6.

⁶¹ Colin Gunton has a helpful discussion of the container metaphor in 'Creation and Mediation in the Theology of Robert W. Jenson: An Encounter and a Convergence', in *Trinity, Time, and Church*, pp. 87–9.

⁶² Aquinas, *ST*, I.10.1.

⁶³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 113.

⁶⁴ Affirmed by Aquinas, *ST*, I.43.2.

of possibility in the eternal generation of the Son. Creaturely difference is possible because of a prior divine difference. This in turn allows the Son to enter creation as incarnate without somehow becoming other than he is. The creation truly is his realm as it unfolds by way of participation in his own eternal generation.⁶⁵ In this way, history is able to unfold within the divine eternity without itself determining that eternity.

Seeing creation's ground in the Son's eternal generation is not unique to Balthasar. Indeed, Jenson affirms something similar.⁶⁶ And though it is not made explicit, Thomas's location of creation in the knowledge and will of God,⁶⁷ which are identified with the processions of the Son and the Spirit, respectively,⁶⁸ would seem to be hitting on the same insight.

What I want to suggest is that, in addition to an *analogia entis* grounded in the eternal generation of the Son, we also recognise an *analogia temporalis* in the divine processions. They are, as Jenson notes, 'eventful differentiations' in the divine life.⁶⁹ And while they must not be understood of in terms of before and after (for that would be to posit the heretical 'there was when he was not'), they cannot really be thought of otherwise. Indeed, Jenson himself goes so far as to say that: 'In the divine life there is therefore no line on which the relation describable as God's sending and Jesus' obedience could occupy a position "after" anything. And again we must remember that antecedent to God's life, there is no realm in which the Son/Logos might "pre"-exist, or not.'⁷⁰ As Aquinas notes, we are inescapably temporal. Therefore, all our knowledge of eternity must arise from the temporal, and can only be conceived of in those terms.⁷¹ That we can only imagine this in terms of temporal succession says more about our epistemological limitations as creatures than it does about the divine life. However, the eventful differentiation of the processions can be seen as the ontological basis for the creature time.⁷²

Indeed, we might even be able to go part way with Jenson in coordinating the tenses past, present and future, with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

⁶⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Action*, vol. 4 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (hereafter TD, 4), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 323–7, 331.

⁶⁶ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 26, 48.

⁶⁷ Aquinas, ST, I.14.8; I.19.4.

⁶⁸ Aquinas, ST, I.19.1–3.

⁶⁹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 102.

⁷⁰ Jenson, 'Logos asarkos', p. 133.

⁷¹ Aquinas, ST, I.10.1.

⁷² See also Cornelius's analysis of Jenson on time, and the suggestion that God's time becomes the condition of possibility for created time in 'Concept of Christ's Preexistence', pp. 138–47. Where my proposal differs is by envisioning the same basic relationship, but without positing 'time' in the divine eternity.

respectively. Because the Father is the principle of origin, he corresponds most closely to *past* than the other hypostases. Likewise, the Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Father and the Son, most closely corresponds to future. And yet, this can only be affirmed in a highly qualified sense. First of all, because there is no actual time, there is no actual before and after involved (unless we decide to go the way of Arius). Second, because such coordination undercuts the involvement of all three hypostases at every stage of history: the Spirit is actively involved not just in the future, but in the past and present; the Father and Son likewise, and not just the Holy Spirit, are actively involved in the future.⁷³

I noted above that Jenson fears that any ontological fissure between Jesus of Nazareth and the eternal Son leads to subordinationism or modalism. For this reason, he considers the differentiation between the eternal processions and temporal missions of the divine hypostases as ‘disastrous’.⁷⁴ His worry is that if God is not ‘identified with’ (i.e. without remainder) the saving events of the Exodus and Christ’s resurrection, then ‘the identification would be a revelation ontologically other than God himself. The revealing events would be our clues to God, but would not be God’.⁷⁵ I want to suggest that Balthasar addresses this issue as well. First, I should note that Aquinas does not give us an ontological gap either. Rather, he argues that the Son’s temporal mission is fully consonant with his eternal procession, but in a historically novel mode. It is not a matter of potentiality being actualised, but rather of the procession itself now having a created term. It is the same act in a different mode. Far from positing a change in the Son with regard to this new mode, though, Aquinas asserts that the only change is on the side of the creature.⁷⁶ In other words, insofar as there is a change, it affects not the eternal hypostasis of the Son, but the humanity of Christ and those joined to him. All of which is consonant with the Chalcedonian ‘without confusion, without change, without division, without separation’.

There is no gap here, even if the Son is not *reduced* to Jesus. This is even more pronounced when one considers the classic *anhypostasia*–*enhyposstasia* distinction. The humanity of Christ is not, on its own, personal. Instead, its personal reality is the eternal and divine Son (*anhypostasia*). By virtue of the hypostatic

⁷³ Jeremy Ive, ‘Robert Jenson’s Theology of History’, in Gunton, *Trinity, Time, and Church*, pp. 154–5. So also Simon Gathercole, ‘Pre-existence, and the Freedom of the Son in Creation and Redemption: An Exposition in Dialogue with Robert Jenson’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7/1 (Jan. 2005), p. 50; Hunsinger, ‘Robert Jenson’s *Systematic Theology*’, p. 172.

⁷⁴ Jenson, *Triune Identity*, p. 125.

⁷⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 59.

⁷⁶ Aquinas, *ST*, I.43.2.

union, because the result is numerically one person, this humanity is personal in the Son's personality (*enhypostasia*). In other words, the full content of the historical person Jesus is the personal reality of the eternal Son of God. Jesus is not a clue to God. He is God. And this can be affirmed without denying to the Son a reality that transcends this history.

Balthasar's formulation helps flesh this out further. Christ does not undergo change in becoming incarnate, for humanity has its own ontological ground in his very divine identity.⁷⁷ Balthasar further helps us see that the mission's consonance with the procession is owing to the fact that even the created term that makes it a mission unfolds within the procession.⁷⁸ So by the incarnation, cross and resurrection, humanity is brought into an eternal dynamic that has always already been in motion, indeed, the very dynamic in which they were created, and which does not change with their gratuitous addition. Add to this David Bentley Hart's observation that, due to the trinitarian dynamics, God does not even need to create us in order to be "our" God, because this relation is ontologically rooted in the eternal generation of the Son, and we have avoided both the ontological gap and the spectres of Hegel and voluntarism with a more robust basis than Jenson's will to retain Nicene orthodoxy.⁷⁹

Finally, I want to suggest that a reappropriation of the doctrine of divine simplicity would go a long way towards ameliorating the problems detected in Jenson's proposals. The point of divine simplicity is that for God there is no composition. There is nothing more basic into which God can be broken down. God is, irreducibly, Godself.⁸⁰ Once more, then, we are not dealing with a mere negation. Instead, simplicity is a positive doctrine, the content of which is God's own unique being. Simplicity is another way of saying that God's existence is his essence, which for Aquinas is identical to God's life.⁸¹ And because it is God's own life that is in view, there should be no reason why Jenson's convictions would require him to reject it.

A commitment to divine simplicity would prevent Hunsinger's charge that Jenson verges upon tritheism with his appeal to the Cappadocians and his teaching about 'God' as the 'beam' of the three sources of light, for since the unity and the triplicity of God are both equally basic, one cannot be played off the other. A good number of Jenson's woes could be settled by

⁷⁷ Balthasar, TD, 4, pp. 323–7, 331.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 329–32. Similarly, Gunton suggests that some of the problems attending Jenson's formulation would be ameliorated were we to see creation taking place in Christ, 'rather than within God simpliciter', 'Creation and Mediation', pp. 91–2.

⁷⁹ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 158.

⁸⁰ Aquinas, ST, I.3.1–8.

⁸¹ Aquinas, ST, I.3.3.

remembering this. There would be no need to worry that beginning with *De Deo Uno* and then moving to *De Deo Trino* in the order of teaching undercuts Christian revelation. Both are aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, understanding simplicity as a positive doctrine would avoid the false dilemma between a God in whom there are 'eventful differentiations' and the static, 'unbaptised' God Jenson rails against. God is his own simplicity as well.

Conclusion: the continuing relevance of the classical doctrine of God

Robert Jenson's desire to uphold the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth and his redeeming work as the site of God's self-disclosure to his human creatures is laudable. However, in the service of this goal, problems ranging from undermining divine freedom to voluntarism arise. It has been my argument that the 'classical' doctrine of God can accommodate Jenson's concerns while more consistently avoiding these problems. Jenson's historicism and emphasis on eschatology help shift the way we think about eternity away from static opposition to time to a more lively and dynamic account.

And yet, as we have seen, Aquinas's Boethian doctrine of eternity is adequate for this. It does not need to be changed, but rather clarified. Going further, Jenson's positing of time in God, while itself highly problematic, allowed us to posit an *analogia temporalis* grounded in the eternal divine processions. This helps to account for eternity's embrace of time without thereby temporalising eternity. Appeal to divine simplicity has shown that attempts to find a priority in either God's oneness or in the hypostases' threeness is moot.

In other words, the 'classical' doctrine of God is adequate for and preferable to the challenges levelled at it by this eminent theologian. And yet, the fact of these challenges shows that distortions have crept into our understanding of that doctrine of God. Jenson's challenges provide the opportunity to rearticulate a properly Christian vision of the eternally simple God in ways that better account for the revelation of that God in Jesus of Nazareth. And rearticulating the doctrine of God in terms adequate to the Christ event is the lifeblood of Jenson's work. It is my hope that this paper has helped carry his cause forward despite parting ways at crucial points.