

TILTED IN THE DIRECTION OF DUNS SCOTUS: SONDEREGGER'S "FORMAL DISTINCTION" AND THE *THEOLOGIA CRUCIS*

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In the summer semester of 1921, the young and still unknown philosopher Martin Heidegger undertook the "deconstruction" of Augustine's synthesis of Paul and Neo-Platonism. He wrote about the mishandling of Romans 1:20, where Paul seemingly asserted knowledge of the invisible God through His created works. This claim was "fundamental," according to Heidegger, for the "orientation of Christian doctrine in Greek philosophy." Romans 1:20 was grasped as a "confirmation of Platonism, taken from Paul." The "Platonic ascent from the sensible world to the supersensible world" was consequently "structured into the basic patterns of Christian thought." But, Heidegger continues, "this is a misunderstanding of the passage from Paul. Only *Luther* really understood this passage for the first time"—even though Luther too later "fell victim to the burden of tradition."

Heidegger cites as evidence for his claim about the early Luther's exposition of Romans 1:20 in the latter's (at the time recently rediscovered) Heidelberg Disputation, where, he says, Luther asserts that the one who "sees what is invisible of God in what has been created is no theologian." Luther's denial means that "the object of theology is not attained by way of metaphysical consideration of the world."¹ Whatever is so captured, as Heidegger would later put it, is "ontotheology," deity idolatrously constructed as highest good of the appropriating creature who asserts self in this epistemic titanism of claiming knowledge of God. This thicket of influential confusions issuing from the pen of Heidegger entered into the

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world of dialectical theology via Heidegger's Marburg association with Rudolf Bultmann and thence into mainstream of German Luther scholarship, where it joined forces with the Kantian anti-metaphysical stance stemming from Albrecht Ritschl in the nineteenth century.²

In reality, in his Christian appropriation of the Decalogue's First Commandment, the mature Luther (in)famously dropped the Exodus preface in favor of a treatment in its place of "the one true God" as the true object of human desire.³ In the Heidelberg Disputation the early Luther explicitly argued that the knowledge of God in creation according to Romans 1:20 is not false but falsely used to evade the judgment of the cross, not by non-theologians but rather by "theologians of glory" who presume already to have arrived in heaven.⁴ And in the Genesis commentary, Luther explicitly asserted the hidden presence of the metaphysical God in His properties of "power, wisdom and love," even in Joseph's trials.⁵

What if, then, Romans 1:20 indicates something quite other than the antinomy created by Heidegger and received by dialectical theology between metaphysical theology and revealed theology? What if Paul's affirmation of the knowledge of the invisible God in His visible works rather expresses Jewish Scriptural theology of the "one true God, beside whom there is no other"? This would be God in all His glorious Aseity hiddenly present, in holy humility, mutably immutable, as substantial love without condition, qualification, even object. And would that not amount to something exactly like what Luther affirmed ontologically: *esse Deum dare!* In that case, there might be a good deal of fruitful interchange between theologians in Luther's tradition⁶ and Episcopalian theologian Katherine Sonderegger, who valiantly, and in my reading, successfully retrieves for the present key commitments of Latin scholastic theology in the first volume of her multivolume *Systematic Theology*.

"In the opening of Paul's letter to the Romans, the apostle makes the remarkable assertion that it is the invisible God who is visible *as the Hidden and Invisible One* in the things that are made." The assertion is made by Paul, she acknowledges, for the purpose of holding the world accountable to God for judgment, but it has been "rarely investigated for its remarkable richness for purely dogmatic purposes," which would be the "pattern etched into Israel's Scriptures—that the high and hidden God is present as the Unseen One . . . the first and foundational Mode of the Lord's Being, a Mode of Aseity that is present with His creatures as Invisibility" (131). Just the failure to recognize this hidden presence is what makes idolaters idolatrous. For the invisible Giver per se and as such is

2. Saarinen AQ: Check text for footnotes, some seems to be missing.

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disclosed through visible gifts other than Himself and ought merely to be acknowledged in praise and thanksgiving in turn.

So read, Romans 1:20 thus runs like the proverbial red thread through Sonderegger's incredible rich and highly nuanced argument for the modes of divine Aseity as perfections communicable to creatures "through the things that have been made." As unconditional Giver of gifts, the Infinite is capable of the finite, even if the reverse is not true. God is Subject in His own objectivity, free person in His own nature, transcendent in His own immanence. In this way the *extracalvinisticum*, taken as a principled Chalcedonianism, guards against the idolatrous capture of God for wayward creaturely purposes. God is known truly in the stance of creaturely adoration "from a distance," not the gaze that incorporates God into human projects.

On the other hand, this intimacy of God to creation is itself the act of freedom proper to a proper deity, the utterly singular One who derives from no other but rather gives life and light to all. This intimacy of Giver to gift marks the asymmetrical compatibilism of Creator and creature that Sonderegger commends, manifest at Golgotha in a "distribution" or "mingling" of subjectivities. The relation of God to creatures is itself God. It is just this utterly unique being, which is disposed to the creature, but never necessitated, that singles out the unique being of proper deity. Focusing on it explains some remarkable denials of certain theological truisms.

God's relation to creation is not to be taken as causal or as ground but as "radiant." God is not to be depicted as Mind, deliberating this possibility or that. To the ash-heaps, then, with the *potentia absoluta et ordinata* distinction! No liberty of indifference for God or for human! Not analogy that succumbs finally to equivocation but univocity stretched tight across the Infinite-finite spectrum keys proper theological discourse. Not metaphysics as theoretical explanation but as meager and cautious description of what is beyond description, which nevertheless makes itself describable so that creatures know and adore. God does not "have" power, but "is" His power, which empowers. Divine simplicity is not simple, the quiescent identity of essence and existence, but rich and complex and creative. As the point of departure for theology—not then Christology and Trinity—simplicity, or as she prefers, "utter Unicity" tells the "mystery" indicated in Romans 1:20. And certainly then no weak and pathetic deity suffering with us, as abject as ourselves! But the eternal God, yet not timelessly so, but as the One disposed for time in a positive, not negative dialectic. This God is "cauterizing fire," then, a fiery furnace aflame—with love for all that He has made!⁷ Victorious—not pathetic—love!

Such denials (my list is not exhaustive) swing left and right, up and down. At various junctures Sonderegger accordingly feels the need to

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defend herself, or rather caution against misunderstandings. The basic claim that God is to be known as present in His Aseity to creatures is (1) argued on the basis of Israel's Scriptures not Platonic philosophy (even if it employs concepts borrowed from the philosophical tradition (2) and is accordingly not guilty of "emanationism" (or its modern recension in Hegelianism), but (3) it is made intelligible by virtue of Scotus's "formal distinction."

An engaging reading of the Book of Numbers, which highlights the tension between Balaam's affirmation of God's immutability and Moses' intercessory prayer that presumes God's mutability, backs the first claim. God is, in this reading of Israel's testimony, mutable Immutability, that is, faithful to His own purposes of good for creatures in a history, which empowers engaged creatures to play their own parts in that history and in this defined way to affect God. So Balaam protects Moses from turning God into a local tribal deity on the one side and Moses protects Balaam from removing God from the local concerns of creatures on the other. The mysterious unity of these two attributions constitutes the utter but also dynamic unicity that is God—much like the Tetragrammaton, both a personal name that could be captured and misused, but at the same time a declaration of uncapturability, so to say.

Because the being of God in Sonderegger's account is always known in relation to creatures, however, there are worries about the aseity of her claim to aseity. "Would not," she herself poses the Thomist objection, "the One God know only Himself? Know and enjoy only the highest Good?" (377). As Thomas built his Christian wall against Neo-platonic emanationism thus in this way, Sonderegger acknowledges that the "language and conceptuality I have used in the doctrine of Omnipotence [*mututis mutandis*, also for her doctrines of Omnipresence and Omniscience] sound dangerously close to "natural" and inevitable emanation . . . that appears *necessary*, not free, *substantial* not voluntary," thus imperiling the very Aseity that she is otherwise most concerned to safeguard (309). The denial of the liberty of indifference, the rejection of the *absoluta-ordinata* distinction, the critique of the divine Mind picture as anthropomorphic all take their revenge here, it would seem, with pantheism the result. Her defense against this evident danger is a "new solution: the radical distinction between God and world should be grounded not in the Divine Will but rather in the Lord's Spiritual Nature" (312). This yields at length a dispositional ontology of the unique God as ever "ready to love" (486).

Whether this is really a new solution or merely a restatement of the problem but advances the argument from Spinoza and Leibniz to Schleiermacher and Hegel is a question still in the balance: "This is the One God, the omnipotent Personal Life who intends Another as the necessary outpouring of the Divine Power. It is the echo and pattern and resonance we see in the Power turned toward a creaturely other" (318). I would be

inclined, through the capitalization of “Another” in this passage and its language of “echo” in reference to the creature, to read an allusion here to the immanent Trinitarian procession of the Son from the Father as the ground of the Creator’s fitting but not necessary relation to creatures. But later on Sonderegger explicitly criticizes and rejects such Trinitarian “grounding.” “Must,” she asks against Barth, “Christian theology *ground* divine-human love in Inner Relations, in the Triune Persons?” (479). The explicit fear here is the social Trinity that is said to exert “tremendous pressure” on the “Divine Unicity” (478). Thus, I cannot then square this circle.

One could reconceive a rich and complex simplicity as consistent Trinitarian perichoresis and thus account ontologically for the spirituality of divine Nature as love. But that account would allow, just as Sonderegger seems at times to fear, the possibility of moments of contradiction (e.g., 321, 373–74) in the historical life of the God of love (e.g., 522 against Brueggemann’s take on Hosea 11). But surely we can conceive of the God of love being against what is against love, the white hot wrath of God burning against the ruin of this good earth (just as Romans 1:20 backs!); and just as surely, on the basis of the vindication of the Crucified One who has freely and out of innocent love identified Himself with the damned, we can conceive of the love of God surpassing wrath to create mercy for “real, not fictitious sinners.” There are intimations of this line of reasoning in Sonderegger’s first volume (e.g., 217, 238, 378), but it remains to be seen how these themes will play out.

The apparent solution to the problem of the compatibility of God as the necessary being and as the free person that runs through the volume is Scotus’s “formal distinction.” In a discussion of the presence of God as free person in the Exodus event and the presence of God as necessary being in the time of enslavement, Sonderegger writes that “these two acts are not the same, any more than two Divine Attributes are identical to each other, nor the mighty acts *ad extra* are reducible to one. No, these two are distinguished by “formal distinctions,” the rescue and the presence, even as they are identical to the Divine Nature” (216). This resort to Scotus to sustain the utter unicity of God as both “objective, abstract Divine Nature” and “pure and true personal subject” is knowingly juxtaposed to Pryzwara’s *analogia entis*, that is, to the Thomist account of God’s unicity as the “Unity of Existence and Essence” (441). The reliance on Scotus for the volume’s chief contention is made explicit thusly: “The very idea that Being Itself could have predicates, could be modified, or more strongly, identified with other properties and qualities, is the distinguished inheritance of scholasticism, most especially that of Duns Scotus” (451). Although she has “tied such rich Simplicity to the “formal distinction” of Duns Scotus, the insight is ancient,” as she shows, drawing on Khaled Anotolios’ account of Gregory of Nyssa (470). Even more anciently, she

finds in Jonathan's love for David a "type of 'formal distinction,' where these acts and emotions of Jonathan differ in character and definition from one another, yet remain at heart one: covenant love" (500–1).

I applaud this resort to Scotus and the "formal distinction" to account for the unity of God in the diversity of His real relations to creatures, that is, relations that are (or have become?) God Himself, as Sonderregger has affirmed. It clarifies the problems involved in thinking together true God and true humanity as Christian dogmatics must do. And in the process, it complicates, if not undermines, the faddish academic narrative of the Fall into Modernity begun in Scotus.⁸ Yet it does not of itself solve the deeper problem that Sonderregger has excavated of what it must mean for God to have newly made the enemy His own beloved child. This seems central to dogmatics taken as knowledge of God.

I should mention a final difficulty. In an important "afterword," so to say, Sonderregger accounts for her exegesis of Holy Scripture. God bless the systematic theologian who can boldly state that preoccupation with "method" is "a fatal disease in dogmatics" (392), given the utter urgency of the knowledge of God for creatures. Only after having plunged into her case for the knowledge of God, then, does Sonderregger allow for a discussion of her method.

Yet I will not be the only one who is perplexed at the profound case for knowledge of God in His Aseity in creation being excavated from the book of revelation rather than the book of nature. Yet just that has been the volume's innovative basic claim. The problem, as it seems to this Lutheran theologian, is that "we want to be God and do not want God to be God," that is, that we do not know ourselves as creatures of this good God who is objectively there for us. Our epistemic access, even to the Bible, then, cannot simply be the positive fact that "here people find God" (515). They also find all sorts of other stuff, good, bad, and indifferent in the Bible such that the Bible can be as much a factory of idols as anything. Our access must be—and here comes the proper reading of Luther's case against theologians of glory—the gospel, that is, the creative love of God, which does not find a pleasant object to enjoy but instead bestows value on the bad and needy. But that access, of course, would seem to imply the opposite manner of presentation in dogmatics beginning with Christology and the Trinity. That may be but a quibble, however. Let us wait to see.

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