NEW TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGIES? TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY, THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN DIALOGUE

TERESA GRACE BROWN

Abstract

The recent translation into English of Klaus Hemmerle's *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology* has led to a renewed interest in ontology and in the construction of new *trinitarian* ontologies. In his *Theses*, Hemmerle argues that a new trinitarian ontology discloses a new order of things: the analogy of Being becomes an analogy of the Trinity. A trinitarian ontology, therefore, turns on an axis of relationality and its impetus is reflexive and performative. In this article, I take up Hemmerle's argument that dialogue with theological anthropology is essential in the development of a trinitarian ontology. I engage the theological anthropologies of Kwok Pui-Lan and Rita Nakashima Brock, whose work reflects a relational turn in theological anthropology, and bring these into dialogue with Hemmerle's insights. In doing so, I consider the implications of contemporary critical consciousness for thinking the human-divine relationship and argue for a Christian trinitarian praxis which explicitly works to subvert narratives and structures that perpetuate the silencing of diverse discourses.

Introduction

Klaus Hemmerle's *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology* was published in German in 1976 and was only recently translated into English.[1] This has led to a surge of interest in the Western world in ontology, specifically trinitarian ontologies, culminating in a conference on 'New Trinitarian Ontologies' at Cambridge in 2019 and a series of conversations at Cambridge and at the European Academy of Religion through 2019, 2020, and as recently as June 2023. The summary of the 2019 conference reads:

Teresa Grace Brown
Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, Australian Catholic University, 115 Victoria Parade, Fitzroy, Victoria 3065, Australia
Email: teresa.brown@acu.edu.au

[1] Klaus Hemmerle, *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2020). First published, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1976). Hemmerle was born in 1929, became bishop of Aachen, Germany, in 1975 and died in 1994.

> Theologians once studied the question of being so as to study the far greater question of God. Modern ontology has often attempted to build a towering structure of being, but, by failing to secure its foundations, has evacuated being into nothing. Yet if ontology cannot contain but rather points to God, then we may once more begin to investigate new approaches to metaphysics or ontology in imitation of the Trinity. We may witness today a great opportunity, one that is equally post-analytic and post-continental, to collaborate in the construction of new ontologies of the Trinity.[2]

In this article, I propose that if theologians internationally are, indeed, to collaborate in the construction of new ontologies of the Trinity, those who hail from the 'West' must become acutely aware of their theological blind spots and take steps to avoid the perpetuation of hegemonic Eurocentrism. By engaging in dialogue with the theologies of the Americas (Black America, Latin America), Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, as well as with post-colonial theologies that are emerging from First Peoples around the world, 'Western' theology might open the space for a true engagement with what it means to think God as Trinity. As ontology, simply expressed, is the theory of beings and Being, or as Hemmerle writes, 'the visibility and expressibility of the meaning of Being,' trinitarian ontology and theological anthropology are necessarily mutually inclusive.[3] Dialogue with the theological anthropologies offered by colleagues around the world might, therefore, prove to be the interruption to Western theology that is needed in thinking new trinitarian ontologies.

However, such a dialogue must come with a caveat: in post-continental thinking, we have become acutely aware of the problematic attempts of modern ontologies to offer rational, certain and universal accounts of the meaning of Being, and of Heidegger's critique of ontology as onto-*theo*logy because of its forgetfulness of the ontological difference between Being and beings.[4] My desire in this essay is to consider the difference it makes to thinking God and human relation to God if we take as our starting point a recognition of the polycentric theological landscape. To this end, my proposals are theological, rather than *theiological*.[5] After briefly summarising Hemmerle's *Theses* and exploring their relational impetus (in dialogue with the critique of modern social constructions of the Trinity), I engage the theological anthropologies of Kwok Pui-Lan

---

[2] University of Cambridge, 'New Trinitarian Ontologies Conference' September 2019, https://philevents.org/event/show/72170.

[3] Hemmerle, *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, 12.

[4] For a cogent discussion on the post-continental critique of metaphysics, and by extension, ontology, see Merold Westphal, 'The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith', *Modern Theology* 23, no. 2 (2007): 253-78.

[5] Kevin Hart's discussion of metaphysics and ontotheology with reference to Heidegger helpfully distinguishes theology from *theiology*. He writes: 'Metaphysics in Heidegger's view is the study of both beings in general, the *on he on*, which is known as ontology, and the study of the ground of beings as a whole, and as the highest ground is called the *theion*, it is known as theology. Thus, when Heidegger and Derrida talk of metaphysics as theology, or about the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics, they are making claims about philosophy's internal logic and historical destiny, not about its relations—historical or conceptual, overt or covert—with religion. Given all this, it would be helpful to distinguish between *theiology*, the study of highest grounds, and *theology*, the study of God. The one necessarily passes through a metaphysics of presence, while the other, at least in theory, is not obliged to do so.' Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, second edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 282, last two emphases mine.

and Rita Nakashima Brock, of the PANAAWTM network (Pacific, Asian, North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry), which focus on anthropological relationality and the construction of human identities. The fruits of this dialogue, I contend, lead to a new consideration of the revelation of God in the event of difference and point to the possibilities presented when theology proceeds from inter-contextual and multi-contextual starting points.

Theology's Relationship with Philosophy: Why the Need for New Ontologies?

Christianity has always existed in a dialectical—even dialogical—relationship with philosophical critical consciousness. John Paul II, in *Fides et ratio*, attests to the critical adoption of Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought patterns in the writings of the Patristics, noting particularly the Christianisation of these thought patterns in the work of the Cappadocians, Denys the Areopagite, and Augustine.[6] Origen drew from Plato to posit theology as rational discourse about God, and Augustine embraced both Greek and Latin philosophies in his famous *De Trinitate*. Importantly, John Paul II contends that the Church Fathers engaged a 'critical consciousness' in their dialogue with philosophy.[7] Indeed, they did not 'restrict their work simply to the transposition of the truths of faith into philosophical categories', but instead engaged constructively with 'points of convergence' as well as 'points of divergence'.[8] By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Platonic approaches had given way to Aristotelian thought patterns, new understandings about the human person had arisen, and a new focus on dialectics and conceptual analysis had led to new questions being brought to the task of theology. In light of this shift, Thomas Aquinas undertook a 'recontextualisation' of theology in dialogue with Aristotelian patterns of thought, as well as with what John Paul II refers to as 'the Arab and Jewish thought of his time'.[9] Thomas' engagement with Aristotelian thought and his concomitant recognition of contextual (philosophical) critical consciousness enabled him to develop a more authentically contextual understanding of faith for and within the shifting context.[10] Just as Hellenisation enabled a shift in Christian critical consciousness, Thomas' dialogue with the philosophical thought patterns of the thirteenth

---

[6] John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (September 14, 1998), 40, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html.

[7] *Fides et ratio*, 40.

[8] *Fides et ratio*, 41.

[9] *Fides et ratio*, 43. Lieven Boeve's work on the centrality of recontextualisation in the development of the Christian tradition is particularly useful here. See especially: Lieven Boeve, 'Orthodoxy, History and Theology: Recontextualisation and its Descriptive and Programmatic Features', in *Orthodoxy, Liberalism, and Adaptation. Essays on Ways of Worldmaking in Times of Change from Biblical, Historical and Systematical Perspectives*, ed. B. Becking, Studies in Theology and Religion (Montreal: Fides, 2011), 185-204; and Lieven Boeve, 'Theology, Recontextualisation and Contemporary Critical Consciousness. Lessons from Richard Schaeffler for a Postmodern Theological Epistemology', in *Théologie et Philosophie. Festschrift Emilio Brito*, ed. E. Gaziaux, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (BETL) (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 455-83.

[10] *Fides et ratio*, 43.

century led not merely to an assimilation of Aristotelian thought, but instead to a 'new synthesis' that 'differed fundamentally from [theology's] former incarnation'.[11]

With the move into what has come to be known as 'modern' philosophy (from the sixteenth to early twentieth centuries, and especially through the time of the Enlightenment), theology again was subject to recontextualisation. Friedrich Schleiermacher's work is a pivotal example: his dialogue with Kantian philosophy, Romanticism and philosophical hermeneutics led him to develop ideas on religious experience that considered the intricate relationship between tradition, context, and experience.[12] Schleiermacher argued that religious experience stands in relation to the past, the present, and the future and shapes reflexively an understanding of the past to the extent that it affects and *effects* the development of tradition.[13] In modernity, dialogue with culture—or more specifically, with the philosophical critical consciousness of culture—became, as Lieven Boeve puts it, 'a methodological demand', leading to new understandings of sacramental experience and Christian praxis.[14] At the same time, the desire to present a rational account of the existence of God and to add theological weight to the modern search for knowledge became a central theological task.[15] A new emphasis on systematics arose, which aimed to affirm the continuing importance of the inherited tradition and the continuity of such a tradition with the modern world, as well as the internal coherence, logic and rationality of Christian doctrine. The new historical awareness reflected in modern philosophy became important for theology, and the concomitant rise of hermeneutics allowed for a re-examination (and even criticism) of the Christian heritage. Univocal conceptions of tradition were questioned, internal plurality came to be recognised within the tradition itself, and theology came to be aware of the contextually bound nature of the interpreting subject as well as the contextually determined nature of tradition.[16] The concern for the recognition of experience challenged theologians to reflect on the urgent issues facing the world, such as poverty, oppression, war, and issues of gender and race relations.[17] By providing a rational account of how these issues might be considered through a Christian lens, modern theologians presented the Christian tradition as having something to offer to the modern world. In a time when religion was pushed to the margins and scientific

---

[11] Boeve argues this point in Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs, (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 32, 31; 28-32.

[12] See Lieven Boeve and Laurence Paul Hemming, 'Introduction', in *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricœur*, eds. Lieven Boeve and Laurence Paul Hemming, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 3. For a more extensive discussion on Schleiermacher's contribution to philosophical hermeneutics, see Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 44-50.

[13] Schleiermacher writes on religious experience: 'this moment is simultaneously a definite point in [a person's] life, a link in the series of spiritual activities that are wholly characteristic for him [or her], an occurrence that, like any other, stands in a particular relationship with a before, a now, and an afterward.' Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. and trans. Richard Crouter, second edition, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 106.

[14] Lieven Boeve, 'Bearing Witness to the Differend: A Model for Theologizing in the Postmodern Context', *Louvain Studies* 20 (1995): 362.

[15] For a helpful overview of the hallmarks of modern theology, see David F. Ford, 'Introduction to Modern Christian Theology', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, eds. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Oxfod: Wiley, 2012), 1-14. Referring to the work of Troeltsch, Ford notes that 'the Enlightenment, not the Reformation, [was] the genesis of modernity.' Ford, 'Modern Christian Theology', 11.

[16] Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 33-35.

[17] Ford, 'Modern Christian Theology', 5.

pursuits of knowledge had come firmly into view, modern Christian theologians were concerned to demonstrate the coherence, relevance and rational nature of Christian faith as ordered and certain—the antidote to the disordered and uncertain world— while also affirming its impetus towards progress, development, advancement, and the search for meaning. The aim was to offer a way of thinking about Christian faith that reflected its indispensability for considering the problems facing the world.

In the second-half of the twentieth century and into current times, so called 'modern' philosophy and its counterpart in theology has been criticised for its sublation of differences (the result of an attempt to offer a harmonious narrative in a climate that reflects the processes of globalisation, secularisation and pluralisation) and for the concomitant potential for the legitimisation of oppression.[18] In *post*modernity (as a new paradigm or as a logical extension of modernity, depending on your philosophical preferences), the philosophical critical consciousness reflects a heightened sensibility for the value of difference in the development of individual and communal identities and an allergy to any hegemonic reduction of the religious or cultural other into an all-encompassing narrative. The philosophical apophatics of Derrida (in his discussion of *différance*), Lyotard (with his attention to *le différend*), and other prominent continental philosophers reflect an awareness of difference as something that is unpresentable, uncontainable, that cannot be recuperated into the prevailing narrative, and yet which cries out to be heard, interrupts, challenges and causes shifts in philosophical and theological method and thought.[19]

In addition to the recognition of difference, the apophatical critical consciousness of continental philosophy has challenged theology towards a retrieval of theological apophatics—especially as it is reflected in the writings of Denys the Areopagite, Aquinas, and the scholastics.[20] This retrieval has led to an acute awareness of the ontological limits of speech about God and to calls for a renewed engagement in negative theology as a necessary accompaniment to our speaking about God. The certainty and rationality that lay at the basis of pre-modern ontologies of the Trinity have been interrupted by the recognition of the limits of language and the provocations that lie at the borders of our contexts. The philosophical shift into post-modernity has resulted in a shift in our *contextual* critical consciousness: we have become acutely aware of the

---

[18] For a cogent summary of thinkers engaging with the critique of modernism and the consideration of various forms of *post*-modernism, see Graham Ward, 'Postmodern Theology', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, eds. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Oxford: Wiley, 2012), 322-38. For a large but accessible discussion on the nature of the current context, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

[19] See Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 278-99; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van den Abbeele, Theory and History of Literature, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. Don Barry et al., eds. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992).

[20] See, for example, E. Jerome Van Kuiken, '"Ye Worship Ye Know Not What"? The Apophatic Turn and the Trinity', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19, no. 4 (2017): 401-20, https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12227; and Lieven Boeve and Kurt Feyaerts, 'Religious Metaphors at the Crossroads between Apophatical Theology and Cognitive Linguistics: an Interdisciplinary Study', in *New Perspectives on Religion, Language and the Human Mind*, eds. Lieven Boeve and Kurt Feyaerts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

contingency of language and of the risks posed by narratives that make universal claims while excluding or ignoring differences that interrupt such claims.[21]

Moving Beyond Hegemony

The task proposed for the delegates of the 'New Trinitarian Ontologies' conference at Cambridge in 2019 was to consider new ontologies of the Trinity in light of philosophical shifts, taking as their starting point Hemmerle's *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to critique in detail the premise of the conference—thinking God in relation to Being—I do consider briefly some of the literature on philosophical-theological apophatics, which proposes that we posit God beyond Being, or even God *without* Being (I will leave for the moment the wide-ranging discussion on the need to 'overcome metaphysics').[22] There is space, however, for critique of a different sort. We might ask, instead, why it is, in a conference that explicitly proceeds from Hemmerle's *Theses* and seeks the co-construction of new ontologies of the Trinity which reflect post-analytical and post-continental thinking, that of the twenty-two delegates, only four were women, and all delegates hailed from the West (the UK, Germany, France, Italy, and the USA).[23] Certainly the lenses and approaches taken were diverse. Respondents engaged relational, phenomenological, Thomistic, metaphysical, apophatic, Hegelian and contemplative approaches to the Trinity, and offered articulations of what it means to think God as Trinity in light of the philosophical critical consciousness of postmodernity. However, amongst the delegates, there was a distinct lack of gender and cultural diversity. What the organisers of the conference seemed to fail to recognise is that philosophical critical consciousness informs and is informed by the *contextual* critical consciousness.[24] Today's contextual critical consciousness stands in

---

[21] 'There is something unpresentable' in our discourses. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, 15.

[22] See Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), esp. 77; Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, second edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012). For a cogent and accessible discussion on overcoming metaphysics, see Westphal, 'The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics', 253-78; and Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology*, ed. John D. Caputo, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 1-28.

[23] University of Cambridge, 'New Trinitarian Ontologies Conference', September 2019, https://phile vents.org/event/show/72170.

[24] As I noted earlier, the turn to difference in the postmodern philosophical critical consciousness is intricately connected with the recognition of the diverse ways in which identity, community and culture are constructed. I refer especially to the work of Schillebeeckx, Schleiermacher, Schaeffler, Metz, and Moltmann, and Boeve's critical engagement with these thinkers in his extensive body of work. See Edward Schillebeeckx, 'From Hermeneutical Theology to Critical Theory' in *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 106-20; Schleiermacher, *On Religion*; Richard Schaeffler, *Religion und kritisches Bewußtsein* [Religion and Critical Consciousness] (Freiburg/München: Alber, 1973); Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* [*Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Studien zu einer prektischen Fundamentaltheologie*], trans. David Smith (London: Burns and Oates, 1980); Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity*, Concilium Series, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*; Lieven Boeve, 'Interrupting Theology—in Gratitude to Johann Baptist Metz', in *Theologie in Gefährdeter Zeit. Stichworte Von Nahen Und Fernen Weggefährten Für Johann Baptist Metz Zum 90*, eds. Hans-Gerd Janssen, Julia D.E. Prinz, and Michael J. Rainer (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2018); Boeve, 'Theology, Recontextualisation.' See also my extended discussion on contextual critical consciousness in light of Boeve's dialogue with these thinkers: Teresa G. Brown, 'Thinking God in Contemporary Theology: The Trinity and Christian Life through the Lens of a Theology of Interruption' (Doctoral dissertation, Australian Catholic University, 2020), esp. 57-86.

dialogue with postmodern philosophy and, therefore, is acutely aware of the voices who are excluded, silenced, or pushed to the margins in any discourse. In an important undertaking such as the development of new trinitarian ontologies, surely 'Western' theology must recognise its theological blind spots: the universality of God's grace as it comes to be revealed in Christian faith cannot adequately be understood if theology proceeds from and continues to perpetuate Western hegemony. The lack of engagement with diverse perspectives in the development of new trinitarian ontologies provides the condition of possibility for a trinitarian ontology that continues to perpetuate the hegemonic theological approaches that the conference explicitly sought to overcome.

One striking submission in the course of the conference came from Graham Ward, who noted,

> In the theological world, we are shouting out for theological imagination […] a theological imagination which can actually move us into a different kind of space […] here is the vision and there is the reality of the Duomo and the security guards. […] The vision does not stop being the vision. The theological imagination sustains the possibility for saying 'this should not be'. […] The theological imagination […] is always bringing us back to [the question of] how do we live and how do we change, because we live and change within the Trinity. How do we do that in a way that is lived out in the realities [of the context]? […] What this to me is about [is] trying to transfigure and energise the theological imagination.[25]

Perhaps the answer to energising the Western theological imagination is to broaden its horizon and engage dialogue partners from wider circles of interest. Ward does in fact make this point in his response to a question posed by a member of the audience:

> If we as a theological community are not actually trying in our theological imagination to embrace a thousand differences in the different kinds of ways in which they are good, then in fact we have failed to capture something of the nature of the vision that we are speaking about.[26]

Taking the impetus towards energising the theological imagination as my starting point in this article, I explore the insights of Hemmerle's *Theses* and engage especially with his retrieval of the notion of relationship and relationality in God, and I then bring them into dialogue with the theological anthropologies of the PANAAWTM network (Pacific, Asian, North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry). I am concerned to consider the difference it might make if Eurocentric 'Western' trinitarian ontologies are interrupted by diverse Christian theological anthropologies throughout the world, especially to the extent that these theological anthropologies proceed from a relational understanding of the human being. While I do not possibly hope to elucidate a new trinitarian ontology, I hope, at least, to highlight some of the fruits of wider discourse for Christian thought and praxis.

---

[25] Graham Ward, 'Day 3 Concluding Discussion', 'New Trinitarian Ontologies Conference', University of Cambridge 2019, https://youtu.be/sMHaga-XkRE, at 14:50-16:40 min.
[26] Ward, 'Day 3 Concluding Discussion', 21:40; 20:00-22:02 min.

Hemmerle, 'Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology'

Hemmerle's *Theses* are divided into four sections: the justification for a new trinitarian ontology; the examination of the particularity of trinitarian faith; the consideration of the foundations for a new ontology; and the identification of some implications for philosophy, theology and Christian praxis. An extended commentary on Hemmerle's *Theses* has already been helpfully provided by John R. Betz, so I will only briefly outline Hemmerle's arguments in each of these areas to the extent that they inform the discussion to follow.[27]

Hemmerle begins by noting that ontology has fallen out of favour in theological thought, because its opponents argue either that it says 'too much' about Being in relation to God, forgetting the need for theological and philosophical apophatics, or that it says 'too little' because the fruits of ontological discussions do not speak into 'the needs and questions of human beings.'[28] He writes, 'everyone wants to get behind ontology. And at the same time, everyone wants to get beyond ontology' in favour of practical, functional, anthropological questions. To this he argues that both theology and philosophy 'need an ontology.'[29] Without it, theology risks being equated with pure history, anthropology, or ethics, or potentially becomes idolatrous. He argues that 'it is precisely ontology—the visibility and expressibility of the meaning of Being—which permits the unfolding of that which God, from [God's] own primordiality, wishes to say, to give, and to be'.[30] He concludes this section by naming theology's 'double a priori': God's revelation—God's speaking—'cannot leap over the necessity for human thinking' (which relies on human language); and human self-understanding is predicated on God's giving of Godself as word.[31]

On the first element of this double a priori, Hemmerle argues that revelation is predicated on transcendental conditions—the recognition that God transcends human thinking and yet enters human thought. God 'surrenders' Godself into the interpretative horizon of human beings in order to reveal.[32] This tells us something about God and about the a priori 'of the divine for the human'.[33] On the second element of theology's double a priori—Hemmerle's argument that human self-understanding is predicated on God's giving of Godself as word—he writes: 'The human word, which precedes God's word is, ontologically, subsequent to the word which makes the human being possible as a being with language, and which, thereby, makes language itself possible'.[34] In Hemmerle's view, this brings both power and vulnerability. God's word becomes susceptible to misunderstanding and misuse while at the same time enabling the actuality of revelation and the elevation of human being to that which transcends

---

[27] John R. Betz, 'What's New in the New Trinitarian Ontology? A Commentary on Klaus Hemmerle's *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*', *Modern Theology* 39, no. 1 (January 2023): 131-158, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12817.

[28] Hemmerle, *Theses*, 10.

[29] Ibid., 10.

[30] Ibid., 12.

[31] Ibid., 14, 16.

[32] Ibid., 16.

[33] Ibid., 18.

[34] Ibid., 16.

human being: 'the human word to which revelation lays claim is […] brought back home to itself, to its origin, and is raised above itself'.[35] This is the a priori 'of the human for the divine'.[36] He continues, 'the character of relationship [between human being and God] is not an addition to the content of revelation; it already *is* its content'.[37] Recognition of the double a priori reflects both the freedom of God and the freedom of the human being; it is a *theological* anthropology and, to that end, supersedes the risk of *pure* anthropology.[38]

If we consider the implications of the first section of Hemmerle's *Theses* for the development of an authentic trinitarian ontology—one that speaks with and into the contemporary critical consciousness—we must recognise that dialogue with theological anthropology is essential. Indeed, a trinitarian ontology framed as it is by Hemmerle necessarily engages a trinitarian *anthropology*. This is because not only is it necessary (as Hemmerle argues) that God creates human beings in order to reveal (in ways that human beings recognise—in the word), but it is also necessary that human beings assent to God's revelation through word, and word (human language) is essentially bound to human experience and context. As we will see later, in my engagement with Kwok Pui-Lan and Rita Nakashima Brock as well as with Hemmerle's French contemporaries, I argue that the realm of human experience in all of its diversity also opens onto the possibility of God who is revealed *beyond* word, in the in-between space (or spaces) between word and word.

In section two of Hemmerle's *Theses*, he reflects on what is distinctively Christian and, therefore, what is central to the development of a *trinitarian* ontology. Hemmerle approaches the question of particularity from the perspective of religion, logos, covenant, Incarnation and Pentecost. Religion displaces identity's 'centre of gravity', he argues: 'The human being no longer lives his (sic) life or understands his world from his own point of view, but rather from that of an Other who has withdrawn from him.'[39] This is 'essentially total,' as much as it is 'paradoxical':

> It is […] a paradox that that which is other than everything and different from everything nevertheless becomes a part of everything, becomes something within everything's horizon, becomes something concrete amongst what is concrete. Religion is grounded in the transcendent's making an incursion into immanence without giving up its claim to be transcendent.[40]

The logos (word), then, makes possible a 'limitless openness,' even a 'transcendental openness'.[41] Moreover, the experience of logos becomes an experience of interconnectedness:

> The human being starts out from himself (sic). He discovers that he is present in everything which he discovers; he finds traces of his own questioning and thinking in everything which his questioning and thinking encounter. The very connection, the way in which everything mirrors everything else, becomes a source of wonder which

---

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 18.

[37] Ibid., 17.

[38] Ibid., 18.

[39] Ibid., 24.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 27.

fascinates him. His life means reconstructing this marvel, means wonderingly recovering the connection which he has discovered. He does not stand, as it were, over against religion, but right inside it. The last and the whole is greater than everything, and yet it is in everything; but it is in everything not in a particular place, or in a particular way, but in everything as a whole, as the depth of everything.[42]

Not only does this interconnectedness reflect the relationship between God and the world, but it also reflects and effects (makes possible) the relationship between human beings. Hemmerle writes that God is the God of the *whole* Covenant: God 'stands on the side of human beings' and at the same time makes it possible that human beings stand on the side of God.[43] As human experience is the 'space' of revelation and encounter with God who reveals in history, relationship with God includes and necessitates relationship with neighbour, 'for the covenant is no longer one aspect of life alongside or beyond others, but embraces and governs all life's aspects and domains'.[44] For Hemmerle, the revelation of Trinity in human experience extends and surpasses the experience of logos: God is 'sole and transcendent'; 'wisdom […] is mirrored in and […] comes to fulfillment in all things'; the logos 'reveals all connections and all secrets'.[45] He writes, 'Wisdom dwells with God, and the word, in which everything is created, lies with [God].'[46] Finally, Hemmerle reminds us of the apophatic impetus of Christian faith:

> [God] is the God of the All, revealed in everything, and is at the same time above it and over against it; [God] has the power to act and to speak concretely, and [God's] word has the right to say something more and something new, beyond that which we can gather from the world by means of our thinking and our wonder.[47]

Drawing together Hemmerle's arguments from the perspectives of religion and covenant, we might say that in Christian faith the world is understood through the lens of an experience of an Other who is both with us and at the same time withdraws from us. This is the Other who enables human beings to see the limitless interconnectedness of all there is, the Other who reveals in human history and continues to reveal in ways that are yet beyond our understanding. Assent in faith to the God of the covenant is not merely an assertion disconnected from life: covenantal relationship enables the recognition of relationship (the interconnectedness of all there is), so love of God cannot be separated from love of and relationship with neighbour and with the world around us.

For Hemmerle, this perspective is rooted in a theology of Incarnation and Pentecost. He argues that in the Incarnation 'the God of the absolute origin and future irrupts into a with-us and alongside-us'.[48] In the Incarnation, God is 'in the middle of the space of our own experience'.[49] History becomes 'the word spoken by the God who is revealed in it, who, appearing and acting at a single point, unconceals and confers the meaning of the

---

42 Ibid., 26.
43 Ibid., 28.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 29.
48 Ibid., 30.
49 Ibid.

whole'.[50] Religion and 'the experience of the logos are thereby integrated, turned inside out and surpassed'.[51] In the Pentecost, the ability to assent to faith in the Incarnation is given in love, not as something done *to* human beings, but instead as something given in gracious free gift: 'What unites the God above us and the God in us, unconditional love, the Holy Spirit, is given to us so that, by virtue of that Spirit, we ourselves, borne up by the Son, may give His upbearing answer.'[52] For Hemmerle, Trinity is therefore 'a statement of the fundamental experience of how human beings are newly given to God and newly given to themselves when they believe in Jesus Christ'.[53] His call for a 'Trinitarian ontology' reflects the recognition that 'our thinking and being, indeed *all* Being, experiences a radical turning if God is the threefold, and, as the threefold, has [God's] history in our history'.[54] Moreover, he argues that this turning supersedes what we have previously thought about human beings, 'about God, about the world, and about Being', and a mere rereading or reformulation of ontology in this light will not suffice.[55]

Hemmerle then lays the foundations for a new, trinitarian, ontology which begins not with the question of 'what endures and what changes' but with the recognition that 'only one thing remains': active participation in the movement of *agape* itself—the movement that displaces 'the centre of gravity from the self to the other'.[56] For Hemmerle, 'this movement is the rhythm of Being; it is the rhythm of giving that gives itself.'[57] He sees his work as a 'phenomenology of Being' as much as it is an ontology, and this phenomenology of Being is grounded in a phenomenology of love:

> Whence else than from a phenomenology of self-giving, from a phenomenology of love, could this new ontology be developed? Such a phenomenology of love does indeed form the background to the following propositions. It is not, however, a matter of incorporating love and self-giving into an overarching phenomenality of that which is, but, on the contrary, of reading the phenomenality of all that is, in a new and unforeshortened way, from the standpoint of love and self-giving.
>
> This has a paradoxical consequence. It is not immediately love which we express in language, but what we have gathered from love, in the most general and formal outline. This, perhaps, expresses best of all how a phenomenology of love articulates the original self-showing of Being and beings.[58]

Hemmerle argues that a phenomenology of Being requires that we read all there *is* 'from the standpoint of love and self-giving'; a trinitarian ontology is at once preceded and superseded by a phenomenology of love.[59]

This raises perhaps an obvious but rather important question about the task Hemmerle has set for himself in the writing of his *Theses*: does he in fact seek to lay the foundations

---

[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 32.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., 33.
[56] Ibid., 35.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., 36.
[59] Ibid.

for a new ontology, or does he instead seek to present a phenomenology of love based on his assent in faith to the God of love who is revealed as Trinity? I noted, above, the critique of onto-theology at the heart of post-structural and post-modern philosophical concerns, but this question speaks also to the heart of Christian particularity. Jean François Lyotard warned of the Christian tendency to posit the Christian narrative as a meta- (or master-) narrative based on the Idea of love; that is, where the gift of love defines and regulates the discourse, legitimises the narrative as the ruling narrative and ignores or subsumes difference.[60] A task to which I will return is to consider how we might think a phenomenology of love or, indeed, a trinitarian ontology, in such a way that difference is affirmed rather than subsumed.

Hemmerle's qualification of what he means by love is helpful for such a task. Love, in Hemmerle's approach, is a verb—a process—and as a verb, it is the very constitution of the noun—Love itself. As verb, love has its identity in going *out* from the self to the other, and doing so continually (and continuously).[61] As process, love—*agape*—is a relationship. It implies a mutual movement of love towards an other, in an other, and from an other, and each 'other' at the same time gives in the process of love and proceeds *from* the process of love.[62] For Hemmerle, a new trinitarian ontology discloses a new order of things: 'out of love, all Being, all thinking, everything that happens is disclosed in its own structure', a structure that is predicated on relationality.[63] Even thinking thinks anew in light of a trinitarian ontology: it is transformed by the process of self-giving love. With resonances to his earlier point on the covenantal relationship between God and the world, Hemmerle notes that God gives Godself away *as* Trinity, and the human answer as *imago Trinitas* is to 'enter into and repeat the moments in which [the unity of] the Trinity happens'; that is, to enter into the event of the Trinity.[64] In this way, Being becomes being-*towards*, -*in* and -*from* an other. He concludes this section with a summary that is especially useful for our purposes:

> [Faith] is the point at which creation enters the Trinitarian happening of being-given and giving. Being-in-Christ is the new mode of existence into which the believer incorporates [self and world]. Jesus' relation to the Father, the Trinitarian ethos, becomes the ethos of self-fulfilment and world-fulfilment. Being-in-Christ, moreover, does not only open into the life of the Trinity, but also opens a Trinitarian relationship *between* [human beings] in the world.[65]

Finally, Hemmerle identifies some implications of approaching Being from the standpoint of a *trinitarian* ontology for both philosophy and theology. The three that are perhaps most central to my task here relate to the relationship between theology and praxis,

---

[60] Lyotard, *The Differend*, 159-60, n. 232.

[61] Hemmerle, *Theses*, 37.

[62] Ibid., 39.

[63] Ibid., 50.

[64] Ibid., 52. I am reminded of Claude Romano's work here. Romano writes, 'an event is always addressed in such a way that the one to whom it happens is himself implicated in what happens to him.' Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinlay (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 30.

[65] Hemmerle, *Theses*, 55.

the necessity of openness and receptivity on the part of the theologian towards what is given, and the performative impetus of a trinitarian ontology. On the first implication—the relationship between theology and praxis—Hemmerle argues that the development of a trinitarian ontology leads to the recognition that theory (theology) and praxis are no longer separated: 'Trinitarian ontology is not only something that thought contains, but something that thought carries out. To think Trinitarian ontology means with one's thinking and speaking—but also, therefore, with one's very existence—to enter into its rhythm oneself.'[66] On the second implication—the necessity of openness and receptivity—Hemmerle writes,

> I can see only whatever I permit to be given to me; I can see only that to which I give myself. Seeing itself happens only in the simultaneity of a giving projection [*Entwurf*] and a receptive understanding—a simultaneity which is no compromise, but is the novelty and unity of seeing.[67]

On the performative impetus of a trinitarian ontology, Hemmerle argues that trinitarian ontology continually reaches towards an other; one is at the same time beginning (giving), accepting, and connecting. This performance, 'as thinking, speaking and Being, goes beyond the "I",' towards 'the performance of the We,' and even to 'the performance of the between'.[68] For Hemmerle, 'a new ontology compels us towards a new society', one that avoids totalitarianism, on the one hand, and synchronicity, on the other.[69] He writes,

> Only the 'Trinitarian model' makes it possible to understand every individual as, in his (sic) own fashion, the origin of society, and, at the same time, to understand society as more than the sum of individuals; to see that society has a single, common life and that this is nevertheless the life of each individual. I, the other, and the whole become the point of departure, the goal and the middle of the movement.[70]

Let us briefly examine critically Hemmerle's theses and highlight some of the insights that will inform the discussion to follow. To be sure, the hallmarks of a social model of the Trinity—such as in the work of Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff, Jürgen Moltmann and Catherine Mowry LaCugna—are strong in Hemmerle's *Theses*.[71] He contends, for example, that God's revelation is predicated on relationship and relationality and that the

---

[66] Ibid., 61.

[67] Ibid., 62.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid., 62-63.

[70] Ibid., 63.

[71] See especially: Miroslav Volf, '"The Trinity is Our Social Program": The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement', *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (July 1998): 403-23; Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005); Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1991); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991). For an extended discussion on social trinitarianism as it is seen especially in Moltmann, see Brown, 'Thinking God in Contemporary Theology', 183-92.

human response to this revelation—assent to the covenant—is the outpouring of love back to God through love of neighbour and world. This outpouring of love could be said to point to the creation of particular types of communities—communities that reflect the call to divine love, which is a love that surpasses human experience and that draws us beyond ourselves to the transcendent. In so-called 'social trinitarianism', human communities at their best are said to mirror (albeit in a limited way) the mutual dynamic indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity. Social trinitarians hold that while human persons are distinct from one another, they are inherently social and communal; they exist in relationship with one another and develop a sense of identity in relation to one another. In this way, they reflect analogously the *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) and *koinonia* (communion) of the Trinity.[72] In social models of the Trinity, such as those exemplified in Boff's and Moltmann's political theologies, the analogous relationship between human communities and trinitarian fellowship has important implications for human life. They hold that not only is the Trinity radically present in communities who work together in prayer and praxis towards the mission of the Church, but such communities also have their very foundations in the life of the Trinity. To express this slightly differently, communities who work towards the completion of salvation history are constituted by the Trinity, which is revealed in their midst. For Moltmann in particular, when human communities reflect the fellowship (or mutual indwelling) of the Trinity, they become *imago Trinitas* and, in modelling trinitarian life, effect their own participation in it.[73]

Critics of social models of the Trinity argue that such approaches tend to posit God and human communities within the same horizon of experience and reduce trinitarian relational dynamics to mere human constructs. As Kathryn Tanner observes, social trinitarianism proffers trinitarian relations not as divine models at the horizon of human hope but as human models predicated onto the divine persons.[74] Alan Torrance further argues that such approaches compromise the transcendence of God over creation and

---

[72] Moltmann's definition of *perichoresis* is developed from the work of John of Damascus in the eighth century: 'An eternal process takes place in the triune God through the exchange of energies. The Father exists in the Son, the Son in the Father, and both of them in the Spirit, just as the Spirit exists in both the Father and the Son. By virtue of their eternal love, they live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one. It is a process of most perfect and intense empathy'. For Moltmann, this mutual indwelling centres on an understanding of the three persons as a *communion* (*koinonia*), rather than a community. There is no hierarchy of persons, but 'the three Persons themselves form their unity, by virtue of their relation to one another and in the eternal perichoresis of their love.' Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 174-77.

[73] For a cogent discussion of Moltmann's approach, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 'The Trinitarian Doctrines of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg in the Context of Contemporary Discussion', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 224.

[74] 'The Trinity itself enters our world to close the gap, but not […] by presenting us with a form of the Trinity we can imitate; the Trinity does not close the gap by making itself over in a human image of community in which we can imitate dialogical fellowship, say. Instead, in Christ, the Trinity enters our world to work over human life in its image, through the incorporation of the human within the divine Trinitarian life.' See Kathryn Tanner, 'Social Trinitarianism and its Critics', in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, eds. Robert J. Woźniak and Giulio Maspero (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 382.

effectively posit participation in trinitarian life as 'a task to be achieved', rather than as an 'event of grace'.[75] Maarten Wisse goes further still to argue that such approaches present problematic ambiguities, one of which relates to their tendency to use 'mirror structures' when referring to the relationship between God and human persons or communities. In these approaches, Wisse argues,

> What is presented as a model in which the very being that God is, namely Trinity, is transferred from God to the created realm, is in practice virtually the same as the reverse: ideal forms of human society are transferred and projected upon the way in which God is.[76]

The result is the relativisation of the differences between God and world, and the potential positing of God and the human person on the same ontological plane. Tanner argues, instead, that human communities participate in Trinitarian life rather than model themselves on it.[77] However, Wisse notes that an ontology of participation can tend towards universalism, that is, it can effectively seek 'to turn the Christian faith into an ideological best explanation of everything'.[78] He argues that trinitarian theology necessarily frames Christian faith and life, but it must do so in a way that is different from the approaches offered to date. For Wisse, faith in Christ renews and restores human beings 'according to the image of God in which we have been created,' indeed, transforms 'our very being into the image of the Trinity.'[79] This transformation 'has the promise of restoring our relationships with other human beings', making us 'free to both love others without mastering them and to love ourselves without competing with others'.[80] Wisse is concerned to recognise the implications of a consideration of the ontological difference between God and the human person when reflecting on the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life, and also concerned to avoid the assertion of the Christian narrative as a metanarrative that forgets its inadequacy in expressing the mystery of God. For Wisse, a recognition of the Trinity as 'indwelling' need not lead to an ontological equation of God with the human person, nor should it lead to the positing of Christian faith over and against other religious traditions and worldviews. Instead, it leads to an explicit understanding of the mystery of God as Trinity and to a concomitant recognition of the intrinsic good of the human person. According to Wisse, faith in the Trinity renews and restores human beings according to the image of the Trinity, and this renews and restores the relationships that Christians have with others and with the world—it leads to a non-competitive way of being in the world.[81]

Hemmerle's *Theses* may well be subject to criticisms similar to those extended to social trinitarianism. Certainly, Hemmerle's contention that faith in Christ enables the

---

[75] Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 310-13; cited in Joy Ann McDougall, 'The Return of Trinitarian Praxis? Moltmann on the Trinity and the Christian Life', *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2003): 180, https://doi.org/10.1086/491276.

[76] Maarten Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation: Augustine's De Trinitate and Contemporary Theology*, first edition (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 9.

[77] Tanner, 'Social Trinitarianism', 382-83.

[78] Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation*, 13.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid., 13; 313-14.

person to see that 'everything mirrors everything else' and that a person's life then means 'reconstructing this marvel [and] recovering the connections' that have been discovered implies a kind of social construction that seeks to image trinitarian life.[82] Moreover, it could imply a negative view of the world, which has either fallen from grace and needs humans for its rediscovery, or which is marked by the human forgetting of grace. Conversely, while social models of the Trinity tend to emphasise the interconnectedness of human beings and relegate difference and diversity to the sidelines, Hemmerle seems to go beyond this by recognising not only the interconnectedness of human beings but also their diversity. For Hemmerle, God's revelation itself (rather than simply the human imaging of God) is predicated on relationship, and this relationship affirms the diversity of language (word), experience and context in the created world: God reveals not only in human lives and communities that act in ways that seek to 'mirror' trinitarian life, but also in human life in all of its diversity. In Hemmerle's view, the character of relationship between human being and God *is* the content of revelation, and the content of revelation is the relationship of love in God—*agapeic* love.[83] So, just as God is revealed as love, God reveals Godself in the action of love towards an other and the one who acts in love speaks God's indwelling love back to God. This is different from a social model of the Trinity to the extent that it is God's agency that enables revelation and human agency that recognises it and responds. For Hemmerle, the recognition of God's revelation *as* Trinity necessitates the structuring of one's existence towards God, not the other way around. Recall Hemmerle's words, cited earlier: 'Trinitarian ontology is not only something that thought contains, but something thought carries out. To think trinitarian ontology means with one's thinking and speaking—but also, therefore, with one's very existence—to enter into its rhythm oneself.'[84] I noted earlier that these insights call for a theological openness and receptivity towards what is given in grace (God's offer of divine love revealed in our midst) and they highlight the performative impetus of a trinitarian ontology. My task for the rest of this article is to consider what might emerge if we take seriously this performative impetus and activate the theological imagination which Ward so rightly called for at the Cambridge conference on New Trinitarian Ontologies.

Insights From Theological-Relational Anthropologies

Rosemary Carbine, known for her expertise in feminist, womanist Mujerista/Latina theologies in the Americas, considers the role that relationality plays in theological anthropology.[85] In her contribution to the *Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, she argues, with M. Shawn Copeland, that 'a religious tradition's claims about the divine, cosmology, soteriology, eschatology and so on', necessarily exist in mutual dialogue with theological anthropology because, from a Christian perspective, 'human beings express and embody' the fundamentally relational dynamic of the divine.[86] She writes,

---

[82] Hemmerle, *Theses*, 26.

[83] Ibid., 35-38.

[84] Ibid., 61.

[85] Rosemary P. Carbine, 'The Relational Turn in Theological Anthropology', in *Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 71-85.

[86] Carbine, 'The Relational Turn in Theological Anthropology', 71. Carbine cites M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 8, 24, 46-50.

[Human beings] are (1) divinely created in and for relationship with God, ourselves, others and the Earth, even unto the cosmos; (2) broken and damaged in those relationships by original sin; (3) actively and perpetually distorting and de-creating those relationships through structural and personal sin; (4) continually healed in those relationships through the divine gift of grace as self-love, love of others and love of God; (5) creatively, cooperatively and constantly living into reclaimed and reconciled relationships through grace-filled and empowered personal, liturgical, social and political praxis; and (6) ultimately open to and reaching for the full potential and flourishing of those relationships, of being and becoming human together, in a perennially not-yet realized eschatological future.[87]

I noted above that the contemporary critical consciousness reflects a heightened sensibility for the value of difference in the development of individual and communal identities and an allergy to any discourse that subsumes or reduces the religious or cultural other into a hegemonic narrative. In postmodern philosophical thought, difference is understood to be something that is unpresentable, uncontainable, and cannot be recuperated; it is essentially *apophatical*, and it has the effect of subverting structures of power that continue to perpetuate and uphold hegemonic truth claims. Structures of power that are considered through a critical lens in today's critical consciousness include not only patriarchal and other hierarchical structures, but also *kyriarchal* structures—those structures that uphold personal and communal privilege on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, social status, religion, and so forth. In her work on the 'relational turn' in feminist theological anthropologies, Carbine argues that a reconstructed understanding of relationality, drawn from the feminist theologies of the PANAATWM (Pacific, Asian, North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry) network, move us beyond kyriarchal (power) structures and into a space that reflects 'egalitarian connections and inclusive solidarity' while recognising and welcoming, rather than essentialising, differences.[88]

Kwok Pui-Lan and Rita Nakashima Brock are two theologians within the PANAAWTM network who write in the area of relational anthropology. Their work opens the space for a consideration of an experience of God within the experience of diverse human identities, especially to the extent that human identities are constructed within and affected by today's globalising and pluralising world. For Kwok and Brock, the construction of identity can open onto an experience of God today, but not only in the sense that we have come to think about the construction of identity in the 'West' (that is, through traditionalisation). For Kwok and Brock, identity formation is a multidimensional process that takes place in interstitial—in-between—spaces where diverse narratives, both powerful and vulnerable, collide and compete. The 'interstices' lie in between and at the intersections of ethnicity, race, gender, class, religion, state and so forth.[89] For Kwok, being human is a process of *becoming* human at these intersections, in the spaces between the borders of these identity markers and even within the borders themselves. It is a process that reflects the intersectionality, interculturality and interrelationality of

---

[87] Carbine, 'The Relational Turn in Theological Anthropology', 71.

[88] Ibid., 72.

[89] Kwok Pui-Lan, 'Fishing the Asia Pacific: Transnationalism and Feminist Theology', in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*, ed. Rita Nakashima Brock (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 10, 5-10, 16-18.

identity construction—the result of being embedded in and influenced by multiple dynamic relationships. For Kwok, the interstices are the spaces 'where different cultural currents, flows of people, and streams of ideas collide and coalesce'.[90] Drawing from the work of Edward Said, Kwok argues that in every situation, a contest of powerful systems emerges and other, less powerful, interests are subsumed into the system, marginalised, silenced, or pushed to extinction by the powerful.[91] The interstice is where competing interests, powers, and cultural hybridity occurs and 'new social subjects are formed because the boundaries of nation-state, citizenship, race, gender, and culture are bring redrawn and rethought'.[92] Brock explains this slightly differently, arguing that in these in-between spaces the human being improvises a self through an ongoing performance of self-awareness and self-acceptance where diverse 'ingredients' come together.[93] These diverse ingredients reflect the social and communal inputs, both positive and negative and everything in between, that are found within us and that impinge upon us. According to Brock, human beings construct a self by

> draw[ing] life from every relationship in our lives. We are imprinted with the voices that give us language, the emotional inflections and words by which we identify feelings, the body rhythms we enact, the ways we examine the world and interact with it, and the knowledge that we come to make our own. We do not choose the others who live in us, but nonetheless, they are how we become who we are. We are constituted by these complex relationships to the world as we internalize them.[94]

In this construction of identity, a person becomes subject to and intersected by a web of kyriarchal power structures which reflect multiple worlds connected by histories of colonialism, imperialism, sexism and racism.[95] These histories partly inhabit us as much as we inhabit them, and the process of identity construction means at times the integration of 'deeply dissonant relations within our self-identities'.[96] Brock refers to living into these identities as 'interstitial integrity', that is, 'making sense and meaning out of the multiple social locations, the hybrid cultures, and the many powers of death and life that are placed before us' and learning to balance these multiple dimensions of the self in spaces that are fluid and unsettling.[97] Interstitial integrity is exercised by observing, assessing, making judgements, remembering and reflecting, 'being present while being aware of being present and examining what we hold together as we weave it'.[98] Living with integrity in these histories means actively reshaping them as one builds a sense of self.[99]

---

[90] Kwok, 'Fishing the Asia Pacific', 18.

[91] Kwok cites Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia Univeristy Press, 2004), 135.

[92] Kwok, 'Fishing the Asia Pacific', 18.

[93] Rita Nakashima Brock, 'Cooking Without Recipes: Interstitial Integrity', in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*, ed. Rita Nakashima Brock (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 126, 126-28, 132-33.

[94] Brock, 'Cooking Without Recipes', 136.

[95] Carbine, 'The Relational Turn in Theological Anthropology', 81.

[96] Ibid., 81.

[97] Brock, 'Cooking Without Recipes', 140.

[98] Ibid., 136.

[99] Ibid., 136-37.

The recognition of the essentially relational dimension of the human person is certainly not new—from the perspective of Christian faith, we need only look to the book of Genesis to see this dynamic in play—but what these insights from the work of Kwok and Brock bring to the discussion is a recognition that not only are human beings created for relationship and to live into these relationships (in reflective and critical ways), we are also always constituted by them. The relational dynamic of the human person, therefore, reflects a recognition that the construction of identity goes beyond relationships with other persons; it necessarily includes a multitude of implicit and explicit relationships with systems, structures and experiences that exist in particular, diverse, hybrid and dynamic human societies as well as in the world around us.

Now, what is most interesting to me in Kwok's work is that she identifies the in-between space with the revelation of God. She offers the notion of 'God of the interstices' to consider how divine power might be envisaged if considered 'from below' rather than from the perspective of the dominant 'Western' theological paradigm, 'from above'.[100] Kwok writes, 'If we imagine divine power not as hierarchical, unilateral, and unidirectional but rather in the form of a matrix, then the interstices are the nodal power connections where something clever and creative can occur.'[101] The grace of God is then 'divine interstitial power at work, [...] energising and enabling, because it rejoices in creating "synergistic relations", readjusts and shifts to find new strength, and discovers hope in the densely woven web of life that sustains us all'.[102] Expressing this slightly differently, and with recourse to Hemmerle's recognition of relationality in God, we might say that the moments of indeterminacy in the construction of identity are potentially grace-filled moments, moments of potential encounter with the tri-une God who reveals *as* and *in* a matrix of divine relationships.

Some Connections

I am struck by the connections between the idea of interstices—as a web of connections in the process of identity construction as well as the in-between space where narratives compete—and Jean-François Lyotard's *le différend*. *Le différend* refers to the open, in-between space in discourse—the elusive moment just after a phrase that precedes the next phrase. Lieven Boeve, a known scholar of Lyotard, explains that for Lyotard, *le différend* is a moment of 'relative nothingness' but at the same time 'absolute fullness'; an 'unutterable, inexpressible, irreducible' event of heterogeneity that interrupts the discourse just for a moment before it is linked with the next phrase.[103] With the link to the next phrase, the conflict—the indeterminacy—is resolved, but the resolution unjustly closes the phrase-event, prevents further linking and silences other possibilities.[104]

We might think about human identities in similar ways: the interstices are the open spaces—the elusive, in-between spaces—that occur as human beings construct their identities; they are the spaces that are open for just a moment before being 'filled in'. The 'filling in' of the interstitial space can support a person to come into the fullness of themselves *as* persons, or it can render the space overtaken by kyriarchal power

---

[100] Kwok, 'Fishing the Asia Pacific', 18-19.

[101] Ibid., 19.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Lieven Boeve, 'Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: New Opportunities for Theology?,' *Philosophy and Theology* 10 (1997): 453-54.

[104] Ibid., 453.

structures. In this process, a violence of sorts ensues, narratives are reduced, subsumed, or silenced, and the person must navigate the space in critical ways. Being attentive to this in-between space means recognising the web of oppressive kyriarchal power structures at work. Just as in discourse, where the move from *le différend* into the next phrase closes the elusive, open, constructive space in the dialogue, the moment that immediately follows the in-between spaces in the process of identity construction *determines* identity, closes the space, renders it subject to and part of social and communal structures of power. Boeve reimagines and recontextualises Lyotard's notion of *le différend*, arguing that the elusive moment of *otherness* within a narrative is potentially the 'instantiation of the Other, the Unrepresentable God-with-us', who does not rupture the narrative, but *interrupts* it, compelling the reader to bear witness to the event of indeterminacy—the event of heterogeneity, of difference.[105] For Boeve, this interruptive event of God is revealed in the incarnation: Christ's radical interruption of history. The event of the interruption of the other (the event of heterogeneity), therefore, is an event of *grace*.[106]

If we look again to Kwok's work and her elucidation of God as a 'God of the interstices', we might say that it is indeed the event of grace as the event of heterogeneity that speaks here, too. The 'limitless openness' of the Logos, to borrow Hemmerle's term, refers to the openness of God towards, in, and from an other, and an openness to the radical interconnectedness between human beings and all there is.[107] This 'limitless openness' opens onto the possibility of the Word as revealed beyond words, in the interstitial spaces where diverse human experiences and contexts come together and where God is potentially recognised as the One who exceeds and transforms human experience—indeed, exceeds and transforms the experience of identity.[108] Claude Romano's work on the event assists us in illustrating this point. He argues that in order for the event to be named as such, it must effect a transformation:

> There is no event without change. […] In order for there to be an event, a change has to appear, or rather, the event is the appearing of the change itself. […] In order for a change to rate as an event, it has to appear to someone as change, that is, it has to modify something from the point of view of one's experience. In order for there to be an event, it does not suffice that something changes; it is necessary for this change to make a change *for* someone. The event is not the transformation itself, it is the appearing of that transformation in the world, or yet again: it is the taking place of that transformation, its occurrence.[109]

At the risk of recuperating Brock's insights into my own narrative, through this lens—the lens of faith in the event of grace—the concern to live with 'interstitial integrity' is potentially a recognition of the transformative effects of the event.

---

[105] Lieven Boeve, 'J.-F. Lyotard's Critique of Master Narratives: Towards a Postmodern Political Theology?', in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, ed. G. De Schrijver, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 314.

[106] Boeve, 'Bearing Witness to the Differend', 375.

[107] Hemmerle, *Theses*, 26, 39.

[108] Robyn Horner has written extensively on the event as excess and transformation, with recourse to Jean-Luc Marion and Claude Romano, among others. See Robyn Horner, *The Experience of God: A Phenomenology of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), esp. 99-111; 149-50.

[109] Claude Romano, *There Is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 217.

Jean-Luc Marion's work has been indispensable in discourse of this kind. As early as *God Without Being* (originally published in French in 1982), Marion offers a phenomenology of love as the antidote to an ontology that hardens God's presence.[110] Of particular note in Marion's text is his rethinking of being and nonbeing with recourse to Paul's letter to the Romans (especially at 4:17), Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (especially at 1:28) and Luke's account of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:12-32). In dialogue with Paul's letter to the Romans, Marion contends that as the world relegates being to nonbeing, it is God who gives and affirms being:

The world leaves these men dead—nonbeings, then. In the world, there is no salvation at all for them. And the world no longer hails them, or names them, or calls them. The ontic difference between being and nonbeing admits no appeal; in the world, it acts irrevocably, without appeal. From elsewhere than the world, then, Gød himself (sic) lodges an appeal. He appeals to his own indifference against the difference between being and nonbeing. He appeals to his own call. And his call sets this indifference into play so that the call not only calls nonbeings to become beings […], but he calls the nonbeings as if they were beings. The call does not take into consideration the difference between nonbeings and beings: the nonbeings are called inasmuch as they are not beings; the nonbeings appear, by virtue of the call, as if they were. […] The fundamental ontic difference between what is and what is not becomes indifferent—for everything becomes indifferent before the difference that Gød marks with the world. […] Among the (non)beings intervenes a difference that, making use of the being that it most certainly calls as such, diverts it from the ontic difference where beings and nonbeings are divided.[111]

In dialogue with the second Pauline text, Marion contends that 'Gød chooses nonbeings in order to annul and abrogate beings. […] Just as nonbeing, once chosen, is discovered as if it were, so being, once annulled, is discovered as if it were not.'[112] Here, Marion argues that Paul does not use the term 'nonbeing' (*ta me onta*) to designate a 'thing'; instead, 'nonbeing' refers to 'men, Christians, in Corinth, […] who are very much there'.[113] At the beginning of the text, they are 'brethren'. At the end, in the eyes of the world, they are 'nonbeings'. It is not that they are denied their humanity, he notes, but they have moved 'below the threshold of recognition, where alterity appears other'.[114] Again, it is the call of God, who is 'outside-the-world' who prompts and affirms their 'beingness' as 'nonbeings'.[115]

Finally in his reading of the Lukan text, Marion contends that in the taking of his inheritance, the son chooses defiliation and, in the eyes of the world, becomes 'nonbeing.' Marion writes, 'Famine (Luke 15:15) symbolically marks this dispersed dissipation—dispersed in a great region, […] an empty and undetermined space, where meaning, even more than food, has disappeared.'[116] Upon his return to the father, the son is re-

---

[110] Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, second edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[111] Ibid., 87-88. Here, Marion places a cross through the predicate, God, in the recognition that God will always exceed it.

[112] Ibid., 89.

[113] Ibid., 92.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid., 93.

[116] Ibid., 98.

stored his humanity, but 'above all' the father 'returns filiation'—relationship.[117] In short, the father recognises the being-ness of the son where the world (and the son himself, and even his own brother) had relegated him to non-being.

This play on the relationship between being and nonbeing in Marion's text rests on his argument that God is *without* being. This is helpful for our purposes not only because it puts into motion the possibility of a trinitarian ontology that affirms the difference between the world and the One who transcends it, but also because it reminds us of the 'beingness' of beings and the tendency of the world (for the purposes of our text, the 'Western' Eurocentric theological world) to reduce the beingness of the 'other' to nonbeing. In my dialogue with Kwok Pui-Lan and Rita Nakashima Brock, it seems to me that in the interstitial space—the space of non-being—God is potentially revealed as the relational One, the one who recognises being and gives being.

I noted earlier that Hemmerle's *Theses* is potentially closer to a phenomenology of love than an ontology as such. Thinking about his work in this way enables us to nuance some of the universal pretentions of his approach. To be clear, as Hemmerle himself notes, his starting point is theological, and the particularity of Christian faith is front and centre in his *Theses*:

> What is new in this new ontology is its approach to a depth which cannot be disclosed from below: to the threefold mystery of God, which is revealed to us in faith. The mystery of this mystery is love, self-giving. From out of love, all Being, all thinking, everything that happens is disclosed in its own structure, the *relecture* of what is revealed to faith is brought about through immediate regard to the phenomenon of love.[118]

From the perspective of Christian faith, human beings are created in the image of God—*imago Dei*—and all of creation reflects the presence of God in sacramental ways. It is not, therefore, anathema for theologians to consider how we might understand the world through the lens of this faith. The danger, of course, is the temptation to posit meaning in such a way that we forget the apophatic impetus of Christian faith and present our meaning-making as Truth. If ontology seeks to define all Being in relation to being, phenomenology recognises the excess that cannot be recuperated in word (or, indeed, in being).[119] To this end, Kwok's work in particular poses an interruption to Western theological thought: it enables the recognition of diverse experiences and contexts in the development and articulation of tradition, and in dialogue with Hemmerle it offers a way of thinking about the relationship between the human and the divine which does not amount to subsuming one into the other. Moreover, it avoids the tendency in ontology to posit God and the human person on the same ontological plane and the tendency of social trinitarianism to posit God as the horizon of human experience.[120] Rather than 'reaching for' God (as do some social trinitarian approaches), in this approach the human being *encounters* God and lives into the mystery that is

---

[117] Ibid.

[118] Hemmerle, *Theses*, 50.

[119] Horner, *The Experience of God*, 18, 162-64.

[120] For an extended discussion on the problem of thinking God in this way, see Brown, 'Thinking God in Contemporary Theology', esp. 179, 191.

revealed. To express this slightly differently, while an ontology as such does not care for or allow for difference, perhaps there is space for difference in a *trinitarian* ontology that recognises the relational impetus of both God and the human person. Indeed, in Kwok's work, conceived as we have done in dialogue with the phenomenology of the event, difference can be conceived as outside of, or beyond, or otherwise than being; difference is revealed in the interstices.[121]

This has important implications for Christian praxis. If God reveals in the midst of difference, and if the recognition of difference is connected with the human assent to God (in the act of *agape*, as Hemmerle describes), such a recognition becomes a theological mandate.[122] For Hemmerle, the human answer to God who is revealed (given) as trinitarian relationality is to 'enter into and repeat the moments in which [… the unity of] the Trinity happens'; that is, to become *imago Trinitas*.[123] If the event of grace is the event of God the Trinity breaking into and interrupting hegemonic discourses, as Boeve argues, and if the event of grace is the event of God the Trinity breaking into and interrupting the construction of identity as it is shaped and reshaped in the struggle for justice—God revealing Godself in the in-between spaces, as Kwok Pui-Lan argues—then Christians *enter into* (some might say *participate* in) the Trinity when they become reflexively aware of and in turn interrupt the oppressive, hegemonic, kyriarchal structures that perpetuate personal privilege over and against another human being who is also, according to a Christian worldview, *imago Trinitas*. To take this seriously is to participate in the movement of *agape* itself, a movement that, as Hemmerle contends, displaces 'the centre of gravity from the self to the other'.[124]

I noted in the first section of this essay that the call to challenge and subvert hegemonic power structures comes about by means of a 'postmodern' philosophical critical consciousness, which is informed by and indebted to a contextual critical consciousness—a human critical consciousness which reflects a wholly human experience of power and vulnerability. In Kwok's and Brock's theological anthropologies, this critical consciousness provides the condition of possibility for bringing to light the web of kyriarchal power structures at work in the construction of human identities. Moreover, reflexive engagement with this critical consciousness challenges human communities to bring to light and even overturn such structures to enable the identities of those silenced and pushed to the margins to come forward. Thinking about this challenge theologically, we might say that when Christians embrace interstitiality and challenge kyriarchal structures that 'fill in' the interstices in ways that subsume, oppress and invalidate difference, they potentially reflect and embody the image of a God of the intersections. In this way, trinitarian relationality is reflected and revealed in the midst of difference: in the transformative event of heterogeneity,

---

[121] I am indebted to Robyn Horner for her insights in relation to this line of argument.

[122] On the concern that such an approach might lead to the essentialisation of differences, it is useful to consider Virginia Burrus' work, especially her exegesis of the narrative of the Pentecost in Acts 2, and Homi K. Bhabha's work on culture and identity. With Bhabha, Burrus argues that in the miracle of languages reflected in the narrative of the Pentecost we possibly hear an 'in-between' space 'that may open the way to conceptualizing an *inter*national culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*'. Virginia Burrus, 'The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles', in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, The Bible and Postcolonialism 13 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 148. See also, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[123] Hemmerle, *Theses*, 24, 26, 52.

[124] Ibid., 35.

in the in-between spaces of discourses and identities, in the person who is designated 'nonbeing' by the world, and even in the person who becomes reflexively aware of the potential for violence in the 'filling in' of open discourses and identities. For Christians today, this recognition enables witness to *agapeic* love as lived in human experience. No longer, then, can we think God in ways that perpetuate unilateral, hierarchical, constructions: God the Trinity reveals *as* Trinity, as the very nature of relationship *with* God and *towards* God, and entering into this relationship begins a process of being and becoming our full human selves. A trinitarian ontology considered in this way points to an experience of God as a web of relationships that works over human experience and charges it with love.[125]