Impassibility and revelation: On the relation between immanence and economy in Orthodox and Lutheran thought

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Abstract

What is the relation between divine unchangeability and the reality of change as implied in ideas of creation and redemption? Western Trinitarian theology in the 20th century tended toward emphasizing the significance of change above divine unchangeability, giving it a modalist and Hegelian flavour that questioned the continuity with the church fathers. For this reason, it has been criticized by Orthodox theologians like Vladimir Lossky and David Bentley Hart. Newer scholarship has shown the significance of Luther’s appropriation of the doctrine of divine unknowability and his insistence on the difference between revelation and divine essence for his understanding of the Trinity, which thus may appear to be much closer to the position of the Orthodox critics than to the Lutheran theologians criticized by them. There thus seems to be an unused potential in Luther’s doctrine of the Trinity that should be of interest both for systematic and ecumenical theology.

Keywords
Theology of the Trinity, Orthodox theology, Lutheran theology, Vladimir Lossky, David Bentley Hart, Martin Luther

I. The problem

One of the most basic and at the same time most challenging problems of the Christian doctrine of God is the question of the relation between divine unchangeability on the one hand and the reality of change on the other. There is a strong philosophical and theological tradition for considering God as eternal and timeless and void of change. At the same time,  

1This seems to be implied, e.g., in biblical passages like Ps 90:2: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” and Jas 1:17: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down
ideas of creation and redemption imply change in the sense that God thereby establishes something that was not there before. Can God then remain the same with creation as in his eternal and unrelated essence? If the answer to that question is yes, concepts like creation, redemption and revelation may seem to come fairly close to the meaningless, as they after all don’t seem to refer to anything significant having ever occurred, at least not as far as God is concerned. History, then, becomes a theologically unimportant concept. On the other hand, if the answer is no and one accepts that God is in fact influenced by his relationship with the world he has created and redeemed to the extent that this establishes a new reality even for God, are then concepts like eternity, timelessness and unchangeability at all applicable to God?

The doctrine of the Trinity is arguably an attempt at solving this problem. Within a Christian context, love is among the central predicates of the divine, but if the world is not to be considered as necessary for God to become God, this love must be independent of God’s relation to the world. The object of God’s eternal love cannot then be any other than God himself. The idea of divine love as eternal in the sense of world-independent in this way necessitates a difference within the oneness of the divine essence to the effect that God from eternity loves God in God. This seems to be the only way of maintaining the idea of divine independence in relation to the world in a way that lets the world be loved by God in freedom and not by logical necessity. Interestingly, this internal relationship in God is what seems to be the message of the biblical story of the baptism of Jesus, where the following is said by the Father with the Spirit as witness: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The story of the baptism of Jesus may then be what in the Bible comes closest to a

from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” All Bible quotations are from New Revised Standard Version.

2E.g., Ps 33:9: “He spoke, and it came to be”; 2 Cor 5:17: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

3Cf., e.g., 1 John 4:8: “God is love.”

4Matt 3:17. Admittedly, this story in itself hardly contains the idea of the Son’s preexistence, which obviously is necessary for it to count as a biblical foundation for the doctrine of the Trinity. But if read in light of the explicit reference to the Trinity in the conclusion of the Gospel (Matt 28:19), there can hardly be any doubt that both the story of the baptism and its close parallel, the story of the Transfiguration, presuppose a doctrine of the Son’s preexistence.
revelation of the eternal relation between the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

Much of the renewal of Trinitarian theology in the 20th century has, however, tended to interpret the doctrine of the Trinity in a way that still emphasizes change over unchangeability by reading the story of creation and/or redemption as a definition of divine essence. This is an emphasis that seems to be common for Karl Barth’s understanding of the atonement as anticipated from eternity, for Karl Rahner’s insistence on the identity between immanent and economic Trinity as appropriated by Eberhard Jüngel and Robert Jenson, and for Jürgen Moltmann’s understanding of the cross of Christ as a critique of the idea of divine impassibility. This approach has its problems, though. The continuity with the theology of the Trinity in the old church may be weak, the influence from Hegelian rationalism seems to be undeniable, and the approach may reveal a kind a modalism that after all implies an understanding of the world as essential for God to be God. If there is no divine difference and history tells us everything about God, then God and history become

5 Stanley J Grenz, *Rediscovering the triune God*, 48-49; Peter Goodwin Heltzel and Christian T. Collins Winn, “Karl Barth, reconciliation and the Trinué God,” 178-81; Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and modern: Studies in the theology of Karl Barth*, 213-21. McCormack’s interpretation of Barth has, however, been criticized as one-sided; see Paul D. Molnar, “Can the electing God be God without us?” and Paul D. Molnar, “Orthodox and modern: Just how modern was Barth’s later theology?”.

6 Peter C. Phan, “Karl Rahner’s theology of the Trinity,” 197-201.

7 Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden*.

8 Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic theology I*, cf. the central quotation p. 57: “The God to be interpreted in this work is the God identified by the biblical narrative.”


10 So, e.g., Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its legacy: An approach to fourth-century Trinitarian theology*. The significance of this observation may be contested; if God develops with the world, the doctrinal continuity of the church becomes less important.

11 For a summary of Hegel’s doctrine of the Trinity, see Grenz, *Rediscovering the triune God*, 24-32, for a discussion of its influence on Barth, see Adam Eitel, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ: Karl Barth and the historicization of God’s being”.


identical.

Emphasizing an appreciation of the irreducible difference between uncreated unchangeability and created change as essential for the Christian understanding of God, Orthodox theologians have therefore been quite critical of what they see as the Hegelian and modalist moves of 20th century Western theology. Two of most outspoken critics are Vladimir Lossky, who in relation to this problem defends the Palamite distinction between God’s essence and his energies, and David Bentley Hart, who finds the idea of divine apatheia or impassibility to be indispensable for Christian theology. What are the reasons they give for their particular emphases, and do they succeed in appropriating the biblical difference between unchangeability and change in a better way than the contemporary Western theologies of the Trinity do?

Investigations of the theology of the Reformers have to a large extent been overlooking the understanding of the Trinity, considering it as an uncontroversial and therefore uninteresting part of the 16th century debate. This view has recently been challenged by investigations of Luther’s Trinitarian disputations of the 1540’s, suggesting that Luther had a doctrine of the Trinity that actually comes quite close to Lossky’s and Hart’s emphasis on changelessness and impassibility. How far do these parallels go? Does the explicit adoption of the church fathers’ teaching on perichoresis and communicatio

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13 Whereas Vladimir Lossky, *The mystical theology of the Eastern church*, 45, criticizes the (Hegelian) idea of “trinitarian development” without mentioning any names, David B. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 155-67 is much more specific in his critique of 20th century Hegelian modalism particularly as he finds it in the work of Robert Jenson. For Jenson’s defence against the critique, see Robert W. Jenson, “Ipse Pater Non Est Impassibilis”.

14 For a discussion of the lack of appreciation of the doctrine of the Trinity in 19th and 20th century Luther scholarship, see Christine Helmer, *The trinity and Martin Luther*, 8-25.

15 Helmer, *The trinity and Martin Luther*, or the shorter summary in Christine Helmer, “God from eternity to eternity: Luther’s trinitarian understanding,” and further Dennis Bielfeldt, “Luther’s Late Trinitarian Disputations,” and Paul R. Hinlicky, “Luther’s New Language of the Spirit”. There is also a significant critique of what is called “the Hegelian ‘natural theology of the cross’” in Jüngel, Pannenberg, Molmann and Jenson in Mark C. Mattes, *The role of justification in contemporary theology* (quotation from p. 9).
idiomatum by the Lutheran reformers even amount to an appropriation of the essentials of the Orthodox understanding of the Trinity? Do we find ourselves in a situation where contemporary Orthodox critics of central elements in the Western approach maintain a position that may be closer to Luther’s than what is found by contemporary Lutheran theologians like Jüngel and Jenson, and among contemporary Western theologians in general? If that is indeed the case, it might open new possibilities both in relation to theological research and ecumenical dialogue. The question is therefore well worth a closer look.

II. The position of Lossky and Hart

Lossky approaches the problem of the relation between divine changelessness and the reality of change from the apophatic presupposition of divine unknowability, and, following in the footsteps of Dionysius the Areopagite, sets deification through contemplation, not knowledge as the goal for the relation with God (43). One therefore relates to the Trinity as “something which transcends all notion both of nature and of person” (44). There are no processions or inner determinations in the Godhead, in fact, even the number three expresses nothing more than “the ineffable order within the Godhead”, and through grace, the contemplating subject can attain to the same “state of eternal stability” or “apátheia” (48). Within this way of thinking, there is therefore “no place for a theology . . . of the divine essence”; the goal of Orthodox spirituality being “a participation in the divine life” through which one possesses “by grace all that the Holy Trinity possesses by nature” (65). Lossky thus solves the problem of the relation between changelessness and changeability by letting humans, who by nature belong to the realm of the latter, by grace being included in the realm of the former.

In order for this not to be interpreted as a subversion of the difference between the uncreated and the created, Lossky appeals to the Palamite – and ineffable – distinction between “the essence of God, . . . which is inaccessible, unknowable and incommunicable; and the energies or divine operations . . . in which He goes forth from Himself . . . and gives

16Concerning Luther’s position in this respect, see Johann Anselm Steiger, “The communicatio idiomatum as the axle and motor of Luther’s theology”.

17References to page numbers in Lossky, The mystical theology of the Eastern church.
Himself” (70), maintaining that human communication with God is limited to the energies. This implies a distinction between the manifestations of God “within the realm of economy” (71) and the “incommunicability of his essence” (73). Still, God is “wholly present in each ray of His divinity” (74). The distinction between essence and energies is not dependent on the world being created, nor does it imply that the world becomes coeternal with God as the divine energies are (74). In this way, Lossky tries to maintain the reality of revelatory change without compromising the idea of divine unchangeability.\textsuperscript{18}

This certainly implies a rejection of Rahner’s Rule of the identity between the economic and immanent Trinity even if Lossky does not spell out this rejection in so many words.\textsuperscript{19} There is in Lossky indeed a difference between divine unknowable simplicity and the differentiations of its manifestations, though even for Lossky, an understanding of the inner relations of the Trinity belong to the realm of economy and revelation. The relation between the essence/energy-distinction and the immanence/economy-distinction in Lossky’s thought is not always easy to grasp, though, and remains one of the most contested and debatable aspects of his approach.\textsuperscript{20}

This may be part of the reason why David Bentley Hart takes Rahner’s Rule “as axiomatic for all meditation upon the Christian doctrine of God” (155)\textsuperscript{21} in so far as one needs to take seriously “the scriptural understanding of how God has acted within history for the restoration of the created world” (156). In doing so, however, one needs to pay attention to two perils inherent in Rahner’s maxim. It could be taken as implying a “theological repristination of Hegel’s ‘trinitarian’ logic” abolishing “any distinction between God’s immanence and his gracious presence within history” to the extent that “God depends upon creation to be God and that creation exists by necessity . . ., so that God is robbed of his true transcendence and creation of its true gratuity” — this is in fact an error Hart finds in the

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. the following summary of Lossky’s position: “The notion of the unknowable essence of God affirms both the freedom of God from created existence and the integrity of created existence.” (Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Divine energies or divine personhood,” 359).

\textsuperscript{19} So Papanikolaou, “Divine energies or divine personhood,” 371.

\textsuperscript{20} For a summary of this critique, see Aristotle Papanikolaou, “The Trinity in contemporary Orthodox theology,” 249.

\textsuperscript{21} Numbers in parenthesis refer to page numbers in Hart, \textit{The Beauty of the Infinite}.
works of both Jüngel, Pannenberg and Jenson (156-157). Or one could succumb to the temptation of forsaking the economic for the immanent Trinity, thus establishing a speculative account of God and neglecting the essentiality of the story of Christ (168), though Hart does not accept the critique that classical Western theologians like Augustine and Thomas in general can be thought to have committed this error.

To avoid the first of these perils, the identification of God with history, Hart finds it necessary to retain the idea of God’s immutability or apatheia as essential for Christian theology (159); according to Hart, “the juxtaposition of the language of divine apatheia with the story of crucified love is . . . what makes the entire narrative of salvation in Christ intelligible” (160). If God does not love us with an immutability that was there even when we were not, his love becomes a reaction and is dethroned from its position as “primordial generosity” and “the ontological possibility of every ontic action” (166). But love as reaction – Hart explicitly refers to what he calls “the ‘supralapsarian’ understanding of the incarnation in its depressing Lutheran and Calvinist forms” (164) as an example of this idea – is not the biblical doctrine of “the blissfull and desiring apatheia that requires no pathos to evoke it, no evil to make it good”. Even the cross of Christ, then, “does not determine the nature of divine love, but rather manifests it”; even before sin there is divine love as “an outpouring that is . . . indefectible happiness”. God’s impassibility is for this reason essentially seen as the loving relation between the persons of the Trinity from eternity (167) understood as “the ground of Christian hope, central to the positive message of the evangel” (355).

Hart’s deliberations are clearly informed by an understanding parallel to Lossky’s of the theological necessity of avoiding the idea of God being determined by history, even if the actual event is that of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. On the contrary, it is the insistence of this particular story as the manifestation of divine apatheia that opens the perspective of it being the foundation of an eternal hope. By avoiding the essence/energy-distinction and replacing it with the idea of the immutability of divine love, however, Hart gives the doctrine of the Trinity a more focused soteriological emphasis while at the same time highlighting the implication that the determination of God by history essentially amounts to his love being determined by evil as divine reaction. If the love of God is eternal and changeless it must be conceived as a reality independent of the story of creation, fall and redemption, even if this story certainly determines the circumstances under which it is made manifest. In this way, Hart shows that only a doctrine of divine changelessness is consistent
with the understanding of the inherent goodness of creation and the understanding of God as eternal love.

III. Time and eternity in Luther’s doctrine of the Trinity

Luther works and writes from within the same apophatic tradition as Lossky and Hart. This can be seen from a number of emphases in his works. He has a deep, but not uncritical familiarity with the works of Dionysius the Areopagite. He distinguishes sharply between God’s unknowable essence and his manifestation in revelation; in Luther’s view; God and Scripture differ in basically the same sense as Creator and creation differ, the implication being that the res of the Scripture is all clarity even if God in his unknowability is not. The similarity with the Palamite essence/energy-distinction is here obvious; Luther is clearly intent of safeguarding the reality of revelation in a way that precludes any attempts at speculation about the inner essence of the divine. The same can be seen in his discussion of the problem of patripassianism; deeply informed by the Chalcedonian understanding of the inseparability of the natures of Christ he accepts the argument that “Christ died, Christ is God, therefore God died,” but immediately adds that this cannot be said about what he calls “der abgesonderte Gott”, i.e., God as perceived in his unknowability apart from his

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22Knut Alfsvåg, “Luther as a reader of Dionysius the Areopagite”. It is an implication of Jenson’s one-sidedly economical approach that he has to consider the entire Dionysian tradition as “bluntly pre-Christian” (Jenson, Systematic theology I, 152).

23Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (WA), vol. 18, 606,10-28 (De servo arbitrio, 1525). For a discussion of this passage within the context of Luther’s work, see Knut Alfsvåg, What no mind has conceived, 239-43.

24Interestingly, there has been a lot of scholarly discussion concerning the integration of Luther’s understanding of unknowability in his general theological project that to a certain extent parallels the critique of Lossky referred to above (note); for a summary of the critique and a defence of Luther’s position, see Knut Alfsvåg, “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” and Klaas Zwanepol, “Zur Diskussion um Gottes Verborgenheit”.

incarnational manifestation.26

The distinction between God as fully determined by the cross and in his word on the one hand and as impassible in his eternity on the other is thus one that by Luther is considered as essential. In this respect, there seems to be a considerable difference between the position of Luther and that of contemporary Lutherans like Jüngel and Jenson; for what reasons and to which effect this difference is maintained, would, however, have to be the topic of another investigation. For now, I would like to explore how a similar vision of the significance and limitation of revelation-based theology also informs Luther’s understanding of the Trinity.

The essentials of Luther’s Trinitarian theology is most easily grasped through a study of the theses he wrote for some of the doctoral disputations at the University of Wittenberg in 1543 and 1544.27 Luther’s point of departure is that God is one and triune, the only Creator of everything outside of himself. This oneness is, however, of another kind than oneness in creation and mathematics in that it allows for the Trinity of distinct divine persons, among whom only the Son has assumed humanity (287,13-25). Luther explores this understanding of divine oneness by relating it to Aristotle’s concept of the infinite. Working from the principle of the coextension of intelligibility and existence, Aristotle rejects the existence of what he calls actual infinity (limitless succession) because it cannot be thought. For Luther, this amounts to a rejection of the possibility of the existence of God for the reason that it falls without the realm of created rationality, a conclusion he finds absurd (255,5-10).28

26 “Nicht der abgesonderte Gott, sondern der vereinigte Gott mit der Menscheit, Denn vom abgesonderten Gott ists beides falsch, Nemlich, das Christus Gott sey, und Gott gestorben sey, Beides ists falsch, denn da ist Gott nicht mensch” (WA 50,589,25-28). On this particular aspect of Luther’s thought, see further Paul R. Hinlicky, Luther and the beloved community: A path for Christian theology after Christendom, chapter two: “‘One of the Trinity suffered’: Luther’s Neo-Chalcedonian Christology”.

27 WA 39II, in the following referenced by page and line number. There is an English translation of the theses without the arguments in Dennis Bielfeldt, Mickey L. Mattox, and Paul R. Hinlicky, The substance of faith: Luther’s doctrinal theology for today, 191-209.

28 Helmer, The trinity and Martin Luther, 80-90; Helmer, “God from eternity to eternity: Luther’s trinitarian understanding,” 135. This in reality amounts to a critique of Thomas Aquinas’ concept of God that was anticipated by Nicholas Cusanus; see Alfsvåg, What no mind has conceived, 126. Helmer one-sidedly refers to Ockham as Luther’s predecessor in this respect, whereas his familiarity
Luther’s view, one cannot meaningfully determine divine matters according to the principle of human comprehensibility.\textsuperscript{29} Aristotle did, however, accept the potential infinity (the sum of existing phenomena), but, as Luther correctly remarks, this is a worldly concept of infinity that is not at all relevant in relation to God (255,13-14). For similar reasons, Luther takes care to keep the concept of generation free from any temporal connotations when it is used as referring to the relations between the persons of the Trinity (254,21-255,2).\textsuperscript{30}

This emphasis on the inability to draw conclusions from creation to the Creator does, however, in Luther’s view not disable the possibility of speaking about the inner aspect of the Trinity any more than it does for Lossky or Hart, but it qualifies it in the sense that this must be done exclusively on the basis of what has been revealed concerning these matters through the work of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{31} Luther therefore explicitly rejects as unhelpful Duns Scotus’ attempt at explaining the relation between oneness and trinity by means of the difference between formal and real distinction (287,29-30)\textsuperscript{32} and accepts the critique against Petrus Lombardus for having distinguished between essence and persons in a way that in reality established a quaternity (287,31-288,2).\textsuperscript{33} Luther’s own strategy is to accept the language of

with apophaticism is probably at least equally important. In this text, Luther accepts Aristotle’s understanding of the limitation of human rationality in this respect; in the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), however, he challenged it, referring to Plato’s understanding of infinity as theologically relevant in a way Aristotle’s is not; see Alfvåg, \textit{What no mind has conceived}, 192-96.

\textsuperscript{29}“Non valet argumentum a creaturis a creatorem” (308,1). According to Bielfeldt, “Luther’s Late Trinitarian Disputations,” 104, Luther in this way conceives the Trinity as “a paradoxical state of affairs that cannot be conceived within standard philosophical categories.”

\textsuperscript{30}Helmer, \textit{The trinity and Martin Luther}, 75-79.

\textsuperscript{31}Helmer, \textit{The trinity and Martin Luther}, 69-71.

\textsuperscript{32}A real distinction is the distinction between the different elements of a composite being, which clearly does not apply to God, while a formal distinction is the distinction between elements that cannot disappear without the whole disappearing; see further Alexander Broadie, “Duns Scotus and William Ockham,” 258-63.

\textsuperscript{33}Lombardus rejected the idea of divine generation to retain the dogma of divine impassibility. Luther agrees with Lombardus that God is impassible and for this reason does not generate in the absolute sense (he does not generate other gods), but that this does not pertain to the relation between the persons of the Trinity. See Bielfeldt, “Luther’s Late Trinitarian Disputations,” 77-79. This is important for Bielfeldt’s argument that Luther is a semantic realist.
the Bible and the doctrinal tradition of the church without pretending he has the ability to clarify the metaphysical relationship between concepts like person, hypostasis, nature and substance. One has to stay satisfied by repeating what God has said without being able to penetrate its logic (364,8-16). Far from being dependent on preconceived metaphysical concepts in his understanding of the Trinity, Luther feels free to use exegesis of the central biblical and confessional texts as the foundation of philosophical critique.  

Luther in this way integrates the apophatic and kataphatic elements of the Christian understanding of God to the effect that he can refer to both at the same time: “Do muß man still schweigen und sprechen: Deus loquitur ibi, audio, esse unum Deum et tres personae, wie Das zugeht, nescio” (364,17-365,3). He does not equate the unknowability of the divine with the immanent Trinity any more than Lossky and Hart do; to the extent that it has been revealed, even the inner aspect of the Trinity certainly is a proper subject for theology. But in applying itself to this task, theology should abstain from any pretension of being able to give an explanation of the eternal relationships in God.

Luther is also very specific about the theological significance of confessing both unchangeable, and for that reason unknowable, divine oneness and the reality of revelation both concerning the immanent and economic Trinity. It aims at guarding the reliability of the gospel as divine promise, which would evaporate if God were to be subject to change and instability in the same sense as the world. Even more than in the Trinitarian disputations, this comes through in the Luther-hymn, “Nun freut euch lieben Christen gmeyn” (1524).  

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34For reasons that seem to border on their own kind of inexplicability, Helmer insists on referring to Luther as dependent on Ockham in his critique of Trinitarian metaphysics, even if she is aware this is not correct: “Moving beyond both Scotus and Ockham, Luther turns back to a terminology he claims is biblical” (Helmer, *The trinity and Martin Luther*, 101) by distinguishing between the res of relation and the res of divine essence in a way “Ockham would never have considered” (p. 106).

35“Then one must keep silence and speak: Here God speaks and I listen: There is one God and three persons, and I don’t know how this can be.”

36I follow Helmer, *The trinity and Martin Luther*, 82 in her critique of Graham White, *Luther as Nominalist* in this respect.

37Helmer, *The trinity and Martin Luther*, 33-36, 120.

38WA 35,422-425; for an English translation, see Martin Luther, *Luther’s works* (LW), vol. 53,219-220. There is a shortened, and not entirely successful, translation of the hymn as number 594 in
This hymn clearly differentiates between the biographical, and hence temporal description of human despair in verses two and three and the divine action inaugurated from verse four, which is motivated by the fact that “God in eternity” deplores this misery. Clearly and carefully Luther draws the line between God’s eternal mercy, which by no means is dependent for its existence on the depravity of humanity, and the divine resolve to act motivated by the interaction between the eternity of divine mercy and the temporality of human sin. In relation to the human misery described in verses two and three, God “thought of his mercy” (verse three), he did not conceive it. There is thus no supralapsarian motivation of the incarnation as far as this hymn is concerned.

On the contrary, salvation has its origin in the inner relationship in the Trinity; the gospel is grounded in the eternal relation between the Father and the Son. Redemption is then the outward manifestation of the internal and eternal loving relationship between the persons of the Trinity. Only in this way the gospel can be received as an unchangeable promise of divine love that will carry its receivers all the way to the eternal fellowship with God as mediated by the One who is both fully God and fully human and therefore proclaims

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39 As emphasized by Helmer, The trinity and Martin Luther, 164, the divine attitude toward human misery is determined by his mercy, whereas divine judgement is exclusively linked to the perspective of free will in verse three (p. 151). There is then according to this hymn no law/gospel-dichotomy in God (p. 149).

40 According to Bayer, “Poetological doctrine of the trinity,” 47, “the following alternative is shattered: either to regard God’s incarnation as a necessary actualization of an eternal decision of predestination . . . or to interpret the incarnation as a reaction to human sin.” The objection against a supralapsarian understanding of the incarnation even in a Lutheran context (so Hart, see page above) might be relevant in relation to Jenson, who essentially follows Barth here (Jenson, Systematic theology 1, 140-41); it is not in relation to Luther. As maintained by Helmer, “God from eternity to eternity: Luther’s trinitarian understanding,” 139, the anthropological law/gospel-dialectics must even in a Lutheran context be placed in the wider framework of delight in the work of the Trinity as is done in this hymn.

41 Helmer, “God from eternity to eternity: Luther’s trinitarian understanding,” 140.
the following: “For I am yours and you are mine, and where I am you will be, too.”

The verses seven through ten are all spoken by the Son to the congregation and contain the promise that he will give the Spirit to speak in his name to comfort, teach and lead the congregation in truth. The hymn is written as a fulfilment of this promise, taking as its starting point the congregation’s praise as the manifestation of the advent of the Spirit promised in verse nine.

Differing from a dominating trend in 20th century Lutheran theology, there is no natural theology of the cross in Luther. On the contrary, the idea of divine changelessness that even for Luther draws the epistemological dividing line between the knowability of creation and the unknowability of the divine, is for him an absolute precondition for the gospel being heard as gospel, i.e., as a promise unperturbed by the variations of temporality. Only then it can be heard in time as the word of God of eternity. For this to work, both the work of creation and redemption and its appropriation by the believing community must be considered as nothing but the outward manifestation of the eternal inner relationships of love between the persons of the Trinity. There thus seems to be no major differences between the theological emphases of Luther, Lossky and Hart.

IV. The Lutheran - Orthodox dialogue – a false start with new possibilities?

For those familiar with the history of the Orthodox - Lutheran relationship, which in itself is a rather slender topic, this is a conclusion that may call forth a number of objections. Did not the Reformers, apparently expecting a kind of congeniality, contact the Orthodox leaders already in the 16th century, but with no significant results as far as the discovery of common

42 This entails both a Christological interpretation of the lament of the sinner of verses two and three which Luther has learned from the church’s Christological interpretation of the penitential Psalms (so Helmer, The trinity and Martin Luther, 156-63) and the inclusion of the human in the divine reality.

43 So Helmer, The trinity and Martin Luther, 134-46; cf. the bold statement in Hinlicky, “Luther’s New Langauge of the Spirit,” 139: “The new language of theology . . . is the Spirit’s own hearing, confessing, rejoicing in us of the infinite inner-trinitarian love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father.” Acknowledging his debts to Robert Jenson for this insight, Hinlicky emphasizes that this does not imply an acceptance of Jenson’s critique of the “axiom of impassibility”; on the contrary, Hinlicky considers this “axiom” as “essential . . . in any serious doctrine of God as Creator”
emphases are concerned?44 And has not the attempt at restarting the dialogue been a continuous, and not entirely successful, struggle with theological differences and misunderstandings acerbated by the lack of a common terminology and several centuries of almost total lack of communication?45 In that respect, dialogue between Protestants and Roman-Catholics often seem much easier, as these denominations at least share a common terminology that facilitate the task of agreeing on the topics of disagreement.

There are, however, observations that may point in a somewhat different direction. Obviously, the 16th century dialogue did not move much beyond mutual misunderstandings heavily influenced by the very different problem histories of the two theological traditions; when the Orthodox said “deification”, the Lutherans heard “synergism” or “Semi-Pelagianism”, and when the Lutherans said “original sin”, the Orthodox heard “Manichaeism”. Added to this were the inner-Lutheran developments through which the second and third generations of Lutheran theologians – while retaining a continuity with the Christology of the Church Fathers46 and an appreciation of the significance of the doctrinal continuity of the church47 that were quite close to Orthodox emphases – lost Luther’s apophatic appreciation of divine unknowability and replaced it with an understanding of the rational transparency of revelation that emphasized the identity between the eternal word of God and its written manifestation in the Bible.48 In due time, this paved the way for Lutheran theology being connected with typically modern philosophical sensibilities, with the


45 For an overview of the documents of the current dialogue, see Zwanepol, “Zur Diskussion um Gottes Verborgenheit”.

46 Article 8 of the Formula of Concord and Martin Chemnitz’ De duabus naturis Christi clearly document this; on this topic, see further J Francis Watson, “Chemnitz and the Eastern Church”.

47 Cf. e.g., the defence of the doctrinal significance of tradition given in Martin Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent, 217-307, originally published in 1565.

48 Gottfried Hornig, “Lehre und Bekenntnis im Protestantismus,” 78-79. The development toward one-sided rationality was even more unambiguous in Reformed Orthodoxy; see Alfsvåg, “Who has known the mind of the Lord?,” 41-44.
opponents to this development being heard as little more than protests from the margins.  

The outcome of this development is arguably the rather paradoxical situation documented in this article, where Orthodox authors draw from the same sources as, and in many respects are much closer to, the thinking of Martin Luther than many of the theologians working within the tradition that carries his name. One could of course use this as a pretext for lamenting the lack of ecumenical responsibility within much contemporary Lutheran and Protestant theology. I would, however, rather suggest that we focus on the potential of the situation. If the renewed understanding of Luther’s Trinitarian theology as developed in this article is not entirely misleading, engagement with the Orthodox tradition should give Lutherans a unique possibility of rediscovering some of the central elements of their own theological trajectory. At the same time, it could give Orthodox theologians a glimpse of an in many ways typically Western theology where they, given the time needed for obtaining the necessary familiarity, still could come to feel very much at home. This particular interaction thus in my view holds unique possibilities for actually moving us closer to a better understanding what the Christian message is all about.

49The most important opponents in my view are Hamann and Kierkegaard. One could also point to the so-called New Lutheranism of the 19th century as significant in this respect.
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