

GOD/TRINITY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Trinitarian Theology and the Faith of Nicaea
 Convener: Nancy Dallavalle, Fairfield University
 Moderator: Robin Landrith, Loyola University Maryland
 Presenter: Paul DeHart, Vanderbilt University
 Respondent: Elizabeth Groppe, University of Dayton

Engaging the conference theme, Paul DeHart of Vanderbilt University offered a paper titled “The Economic Trinity and the Nicene Faith —Learning from Schleiermacher.”

DeHart argued that a careful reading of the Trinitarian theology of the great nineteenth-century Protestant thinker Friedrich Schleiermacher offers useful insights, even for Catholic theologians committed to the orthodox creedal doctrine Schleiermacher rejected. For him, Jesus of Nazareth is that being in whom the universal pre-thematic awareness of God common to all human beings, while always hindered and distorted by the individual and collective privileging of world-consciousness, breaks through into a perfect ordering and expression of our world-consciousness which is at the same time consciousness of the creator. Thus, beyond the creator’s presence upholding the world as a whole, this consciousness in Jesus is a new and radical presence of the creator within the world, a presence that can be communicated to others. Where a community exists that disseminates the power of Jesus’s triumphant God-consciousness to its members, there, too, in the human collective (the church), comes to be another mode of divine presence in the world, dependent upon the first but just as real. Schleiermacher’s doctrine of the Trinity bases itself on this triad of modes of divine presence in the world.

From an orthodox perspective, DeHart observed, the key deficits of Schleiermacher’s theology are, first, an exaggerated fear of anthropomorphism that undermines his own centralization of human mediation of God’s redeeming presence in the world; second, a hostility to eschatology that cannot accommodate the divinizing soteriology that underpins the Nicene approach; and third, a view of incarnation that does not allow Jesus himself to speak and act as a divine (as well as human) person. These result in his modalist rejection of eternal persons in God. On the other hand, DeHart continued, the strong points of his theology that highlight essential conditions for Nicene retrieval include, first, rooting the discourse of the Trinity firmly in the economy of salvation; and second, situating trinitarian claims within an overarching and rigorous theory of God as creator with the limits this imposes on our language and conception.

Turning to more recent work in trinitarian theology, DeHart argued that the attempts by Schleiermacher’s immediate heirs to go beyond his modalism resulted in an unfortunate division of “immanent” and “economic” Trinities that has been a problem ever since.

Elizabeth Groppe’s response to DeHart’s paper raised four points. 1) Observing Schleiermacher’s own reflections on love, she wondered whether creedal language should reflect not only “light from light,” but also “love from love,” given the procession of the Holy Spirit “as love?” DeHart acknowledged that “love” is not central

in the creedal language, but cautioned that any “augmentation” of the creed would create ecumenical hurdles. He also observed that this move would not in itself address the need to understand and “experience divine love as the essence of all our doctrinal discourse.” 2) Groppe raised Catherine LaCugna’s response to Schleiermacher’s reservations about trinitarian language, noting that she favored the early framing of *theologia* and *oikonomia* as preferable to the economic/immanent distinction, DeHart found this framing useful. 3) Responding to Groppe’s question about Schleiermacher’s use of “person,” DeHart clarified that while S. was appropriately wary of the modern use of “person” for the earlier “hypostasis,” he found this use “necessary,” to the notion of the incarnation “as the Word’s assumption of humanity.” 4) In closing, Groppe’s response lifted up DeHart’s “doxological” observation that Schleiermacher seemed to understand that the economy is an “analogical conduit by which our love and liturgy truly enter into what surpasses our knowing.” DeHart appreciated this, as for Schleiermacher, he claimed, “our relation to God’s triune redemption” goes beyond the conceptual due to the “basic role of ‘feeling’ or ‘immediate self-consciousness’ in every moment of our apprehension of God.”

A general discussion followed, lifting up additional questions about both Groppe’s consideration of the word “love” and about the issues involved in the retrieval of the *theologia/oikonomia* distinction.

Opening the session, convener Nancy Dallavalle observed with regret that a planned second respondent, Darren Dias (University of Toronto), was unable to attend this year due to new and restrictive border policies between the United States and Canada.

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