

## What (Not) to Do with the Trinity: Doctrine, Discipline, and Doxology in Contemporary Trinitarian Discourse

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*The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation.* By Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell. New Kensington, Pa.: Whitaker House, 2016. 224 pp. \$23.99 (cloth).

*Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus.* By Charles C. Twombly. Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2015. 132 pp. \$18.00 (paper).

### *Introduction*

The difficulties in writing a review on a text like Richard Rohr's *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* are manifold. First, the chorus of praise for the book is voluminous: the first six pages include twenty-four ringing endorsements from authors, artists, pastors, and celebrities ranging from Bono and Michael Gungor to James Martin, SJ, Nadia Bolz Webber, Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, and Jim Wallis. Second, Rohr did not write this book; Mike Morrell, a founding organizer of the Wild Goose Festival, transcribed and organized materials from two of Rohr's conferences into a manuscript that Rohr then approved. Third, the book includes a number of kitschy aspects that work to cultivate a disarming and intimate atmosphere: the typography, for instance—the periods are crosses; and the verbiage—Rohr calls the Trinity a “circle dance,” and encourages readers to think of God or the persons of the Trinity using terms like “Divine DNA,” “God Compass,” and “Flow.” Similarly, Rohr adopts a winsome tone that aims at accessibility but can also appear irreverent or even mildly insulting to his readers. The intention behind these

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authorial and editorial decisions, as Rohr indicates, is to overcome the inescapably modern dichotomy between spirituality and daily life. But for the theologically inclined, these elements can be dissuasive, irksome, or even problematic, and ultimately distract from careful reflection on the substance of Rohr's proposal.

### *Trinitarian Theology Today*

Rohr's *Divine Dance* is one of the most recent in a long line of similar proposals for the rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It has been, for several different reasons, fashionable for theologians to assert the loss of the doctrine of the Trinity—either among their own in the guild or in the laity—and to advance enthusiastic proposals for its recovery, its relevance to, and its implementation in spiritual direction, political thought, gender relations, or church governance. This enthusiasm to “make the Trinity great again,”<sup>1</sup> unsurprisingly, has been met with caution, and sometimes chagrin, by those who deny a wholesale “loss” of the doctrine of the Trinity, and moreover resist any such proposals that would justify the Trinity as “good for” anything other than coming to understand and be in relationship with God.

Heuristically, it may be helpful to break down contemporary trinitarian discourse into three (sometimes overlapping) types. The first of these types might be recognized by its emphasis on the social implications of the doctrine, and is exemplified by such luminaries as Leonardo Boff,<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Johnson,<sup>3</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna,<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Moltmann,<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Volf,<sup>6</sup> and John Zizioulas.<sup>7</sup> In this first

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Sanders, “We Actually Don’t Need a Trinitarian Revival,” *Christianity Today*, May 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/may-web-only/we-dont-need-trinity-revival-fred-sanders.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).

type, the relevance of the Trinity is key to resolving particular contextual issues. Accordingly, returning to some primitive understanding of the Trinity is crucial. Yet, whereas “Social Trinitarianism” attempts to return to and apply insights into the inner life of God to contemporary practical ends, a second type of trinitarian discourse operates initially and sometimes primarily from within the historical record. Here we might think especially of studies of the theology of the early church by Khaled Anatolios,<sup>8</sup> Lewis Ayres,<sup>9</sup> John Behr,<sup>10</sup> and Rowan Williams,<sup>11</sup> as well as studies of modern trinitarian thought by Karen Kilby,<sup>12</sup> Fred Sanders,<sup>13</sup> and R. Kendall Soulen,<sup>14</sup> to name just a few. A subset of this former group would also include the constructive retrievals of the doctrine by Sarah Coakley,<sup>15</sup> the late Stanley Grenz,<sup>16</sup> the late Robert Jenson,<sup>17</sup> Katherine Sonderegger,<sup>18</sup> and Kathryn Tanner.<sup>19</sup>

We also might identify a final type of author whose emphasis is less on historical or conceptual analysis, and more on mystical and therapeutic ends. This final group includes such popular figures as

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<sup>8</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004), and *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2004), and *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, and *The Nicene Faith*, vols. 1 & 2 (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001 and 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with the Social Doctrine of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* (2000): 432–445; “Trinity and Politics: An Apophatic Approach,” in Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders, ed., *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001).

Cynthia Bourgeault,<sup>20</sup> Ilia Delio,<sup>21</sup> and Richard Rohr. Many writers in this type come from a Roman Catholic context, and nearly all subscribe to the decline narrative of the loss of the doctrine of the Trinity. For many of them, a successful recovery of the doctrine entails significant revisions of the doctrine that align with societal or scientific changes or breakthroughs, contemporary psychology, or ecclesiological tensions.

### *The Divine Dance*

Richard Rohr, OFM, is an internationally acclaimed Franciscan priest, spiritual director, and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation and the Living School in New Mexico. *The Divine Dance* is the most recent of his many books, and perhaps the most aggressive in terms of a theological agenda. Rohr pitches this book as offering a “spiritual paradigm shift,” invoking Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in the first pages of the book. How does Rohr understand this spiritual paradigm shift? He seeks to overcome “the common Christian image of God,” which he calls “largely ‘pagan’ (not that pagans are bad people, by the way!) and untransformed” (p. 35). What kind of transformation would satisfy Rohr? Nothing less than the recasting of the Trinity as a “relationship” rather than as a “static and imperial image of God” (pp. 35–36).

In the chapters that follow, Rohr claims not only to introduce his readers to a neglected part of the Christian spiritual tradition, but more importantly to invite us into a “dance,” or “flow.” We are welcomed into the relationship that is God. Rohr loves Andrei Rublev’s famous Trinity icon as a metaphor for this trinitarian dynamic. In the icon, we are called to take our seat at the table, to assume what Rohr considers our divine birthright.

Becoming caught up in a beautiful circle dance, he explains, will lead us to new spiritual heights, whereas being caught up in a technical

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<sup>20</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three: Discovering the Radical Truth at the Heart of Christianity* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Ilia Delio, “Godhead or Godahead? Rethinking the Trinity in Light of Emergence,” in Philip Rossi, ed., *God, Grace, and Creation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), and *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2013).

and metaphysical (by which Rohr means an Aristotelian) understanding of the Trinity has had the negative effect of casting the Trinity as a noun, a thing, instead of a relationship. Strangely, but significantly, Rohr refers to the Trinity without the definite article, although liturgy, theology, and conversation usually include it. "Trinity," he says, "is the ultimate paradigm shift . . . it should have changed everything, but it didn't. The doctrine of the Trinity was largely shelved as an embarrassing distraction. . . . God was diminished and we all lost out" (p. 80). Rohr's perspective on the homiletic and theological tradition is certainly tragic. Recovering "Trinity," he hopes, will accomplish a myriad of goals, including destroying the idea that God's intratrinitarian life is inherently competitive, helping us, in the first place, to know God rather as "inter-being" and "uninhibited flow," and in the second place, to renew both Christianity and the larger society as a communal body oriented around hope (pp. 59, 81).

It seems to be the case that what is being recovered is not the doctrine of the Trinity, as much as something that he envisions as a spirituality or network of practices. Rohr claims that the essence of the divine life is not the persons themselves, but the *flow* that undergirds the persons. The flow expresses itself as "relationship" and precedes the persons in existence and priority. He says, "The Three are formed and identified by the outpouring and uninhibited flow itself. The flow forms and protects the Three and the Three distribute the flow. It's precisely the same dynamic for a healthy society, isn't it?" (p. 84). Is it? Rohr believes that what is so brilliant about the Trinity is that it finds in God basically the same dynamism we find in (social) existence itself. What we see as exemplary, albeit characteristic, in Trinity should be evident everywhere in daily life.

This vision of Trinity is renewing, he thinks, because it calls people to a kind of self-examination, particularly to evaluate their attitude toward existence itself. He asks, "So what is your 'flow' right now? Are you sucking in or flowing out? . . . You must learn to tell the difference within yourself. Otherwise you won't know what to pray for" (p. 86). The turn to prayer is meant to invoke the Spirit, a name that Rohr uses interchangeably with existence and flow. Rohr's anxiety is that we have constrained or blocked the Spirit/flow. He asserts that this blockage is the foundation of tribal religion. Accordingly, tribal religion is *spiritless*, whereas a life oriented to the flow partakes of the fullness

of the Spirit and existence. Exult in the wild flow of the Spirit, who “blows where she will” (p. 191). Such freedom, he charges, is both the foundation and end of the Christian call to glorify God.

Some might be alarmed at how vague this spirituality of the flow sounds. Rohr intends to calm this alarm, however, by insisting that we cannot categorize or define the action of the Spirit, except to say that the Spirit is love and moves everywhere through this love, both creating and connecting (pp. 186–191). In other words, conforming to this wild and connective love entails a recognition of one’s place in the flow, a receptive stance toward the flow, and an active and liberal handing on of love (also the flow). Such is the essence of his spirituality of flow.

Rohr posits that the preeminent example of life in the flow is Jesus. He rereads the prologue of John’s Gospel, substituting “Word” with “relationship” or “blueprint.” “In the beginning was the relationship,” and “the blueprint took shape” (pp. 30, 36, 186). Jesus’ relationship to the Father through the Spirit was “enacted” when Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism (p. 186). It is unclear whether or not Rohr intends his dictum about relationship and enacting to be read in adoptionistic terms, namely that Jesus comes to receive his divine identity once he takes his place in the flow. Whether or not he intended it thus, materially Rohr’s Christology in this book strikes a profoundly adoptionistic note insofar as Jesus is actualized as the blueprint and relationship at the moment of his baptism. Moreover, it is unclear how this reading of the prologue of John’s Gospel actually takes into account the preexistence of the Word/relationship/blueprint, or the stark division between the “Light” and the “world.” John’s Gospel seems an unusual text with which to begin an adoptionistic Christology.

The problems do not end with Rohr’s theology of the Spirit or the incarnation. In fact, his pneumatological and christological issues give rise to two grave confusions. Rohr elides the difference between divine and creaturely nature, and conflates the divine agency of salvation with the personal, human experience of salvation and unification. Regarding the first confusion, Rohr’s extended argument throughout the book is that the flow, the very essence of divine life had by the members of the Trinity, is extended directly and without mediation to creation. It is not simply that God generously shares what is his by nature with creation by grace, but creation through the flow becomes *another* member of the dance. Indeed, the title of the book comes from this realization on Rohr’s part; he retranslates the word by which

theologians describe the internal life of the Trinity, *perichoresis*, to mean “circle-dance.” His rationale, following Rob Bell, he claims, is that the root of the Greek word *perichoresis* is also the root of the English word “choreography” (p. 31). The problem with this translation, however, is that there is no evidence whatsoever for linking *perichoresis* with the activity of dancing, much less group dancing.<sup>22</sup>

What begins as an innocuous etymological gaffe takes on a life of its own as Rohr then confuses his divine choreography for the essence of the divine life itself. He supports this assertion by blaming Aristotelian substance metaphysics for reinforcing a too-concrete notion of the “persons” (“person” is just a metaphor, he charges), to the detriment of seeing the interpenetration of the persons as the ground of divine being. Here again, as with his interpretation of *perichoresis*, Rohr fails to share any evidence he might have for such a move.

Worse, however, is that in place of the supposedly classical understanding of the mutual indwelling of the persons, Rohr supplies a concept of universal interpenetration that transcends the three persons. “Creation is the fourth person of the Trinity” (p. 66). Yet in the very same paragraph, he uses the language of invitation. All existent things, he argues, are already part of and yet simultaneously invited, or perhaps welcome, to partake in this interpenetration, this circle dance. It is unclear who or what is welcoming us into this dance that we are already part of. In any case, what classical soteriology understood as solely the work of divine grace—God offers salvation and union as a gift—Rohr sees as an expression of something natural to and emergent in the cosmos.

Indeed, Rohr’s universal application of *perichoresis* to both God and creation has the effect of making *perichoresis* the foundation of the divine life as well as the foundation of all reality. Reinterpreting John 1, he says, “In the beginning was the relationship” (pp. 30, 36). The effect of such a reading, Rohr suggests, is that creation is constituted in the same way as the three trinitarian persons—by the circle dance of the flow. Indeed, this is why the book’s cover is Rublev’s *Trinity*. Rohr posits that unnamed “art historians” suggest that a mirror used to be glued to the front of icon, such that one could look at the icon and see themselves as the fourth member of the Trinity

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<sup>22</sup> Rohr is possibly following Catherine LaCugna in this mistranslation. Cf. with LaCugna, *God for Us*, 271.

(p. 30).<sup>23</sup> So much for *deus non est genere* (“God is not a thing among other things”).

The net result of this first confusion is that Rohr effectively undermines the creedal doctrine of the Trinity. In Rohr’s hands, God is not three-in-one, but a many-in-one *dance* that is always growing. And this helps us understand why Rohr claims that the Trinity was lost until William P. Young wrote *The Shack*. “We would have to admit this was largely true until William Paul Young wrote his worldwide best-selling novel, *The Shack*, in the past decade. For the first time since fourth century Cappadocia, the Trinity became an inspired subject of conversation. . . . But seventeen centuries of being missing in action—how could this have been true?” (p. 26).

Rohr’s claim that the Trinity was or is “MIA” is not true in any sense. Christian theologians have always been engaged in dialogue about the Trinity. In fact, long before Young even penned *The Shack*, the discipline of doctrinal theology, amongst Protestants and Catholics alike, experienced a well-known renewal of trinitarian scholarship, including the significant and galvanizing contribution of theologians in the 1950s and ’60s (for example, Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Hans Urs von Balthasar). Rohr does call Rahner to his aid, but appears to misunderstand Rahner’s argument in *The Trinity* when he (Rohr) admonishes us to abandon the word *God* for “‘Holy Mystery’ for fifty years, to cauterize the wound we’ve inflicted on our culture and ourselves” (p. 89). Rahner would never have called us to abandon trinitarian language. *Then again, perhaps what Christian theologians have meant by the Trinity is not what Rohr means.* An adoptionistic, nonpersonal, flow-based Trinity take us far from the field of anything resembling classical trinitarian discourse, including the trinitarianism of the Cappadocian fathers to whom Rohr claims to be indebted.

Along these lines, it is also unclear how Rohr’s spirituality of the flow recovers the Trinity for spiritual or mystical experience, as he claims that it does. One need only look to writers like Thomas Merton, Caryll Houselander, Dorothy Day, Richard Foster, Henri

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<sup>23</sup> In contrast to Rohr’s use of Rublev’s icon, one thinks of Sarah Coakley’s extensive and more robust use of icons and art in her *God, Sexuality, and Self*, the end result of which is a more robust understanding of the theology behind the historic doctrine of the Trinity, as well as Rublev’s own mindset, most likely.

Nouwen, Dallas Willard, Rosemary Haughton, and, more recently, Fleming Rutledge to see that the Trinity has received no lack of attention in spirituality or mysticism. Nouwen even wrote a contemplative meditation on Rublev's Trinity icon. Merton is probably closest to Rohr in his vision of the Trinity. But even Merton saw that the persons of the Trinity are selves in ways that humans can never be: namely, the triune persons are utterly *selfless*. So too, for Merton, Christ is absolutely essential to draw us into the selflessness and infinite capacity of the Trinity.

As far as I can tell, it's just not the case that the Trinity was lost at any point of Christian history to either systematic theology or spirituality. Unfortunately, Rohr fails to explain or qualify his claim, which only demonstrates another unfortunate aspect of the book. It's not that he doesn't cite his sources—which he usually doesn't. Rather, by omitting his sources, evidence, and, quite often, the rationale behind his conclusions, he seems to imply that his readers aren't smart enough to follow his logic. Don't worry about how we get there, folks. Just go with the flow. As a teacher and priest myself, the combination of Rohr's condescending tone and his sloppy logic is one of the most troubling aspects of the book.

Rohr's style and theological infelicities lead to a second confusion: confusing salvation and glorification or unification. For me, a worrisome sign of this confusion is simply that Rohr never really challenges us to be better than we are, because he never identifies a problem in his readers. He gestures at large-scale, social, and philosophical problems by uttering vague and abstract notions like "individualism" or "substance" metaphysics (pp. 44–45, 59–60). Yet the idea that I, the reader, might be so corrupted by self-interest, deceit, and general waywardness that I might need a savior to save me from myself, to liberate me from that which I have done and that which I have left undone, to teach me how to love my neighbor as myself through self-less and self-sacrificial love goes virtually unnoticed. It could be the case that Rohr does not see this fundamental need in the human person because he does not believe that humans are sinful. In this volume, at least, I found no evidence that he believes that sin is something that afflicts the human person. Rather, sin is simply "whatever stops the flow," a "negative capability," something that does not offend God's justice or glory, as classical definitions of sin have proposed, but rather hurts God because "God could only be 'hurt' if we our hurt ourselves"

(p. 160). And failing to attend to the very real problem of human sin, Rohr's prescription to join the circle dance of the Trinity seems premature and insufficient. It confuses two distinct moments in the Christian life: salvation and sanctification. It elides the real need for humans to confront their waywardness before they become holy. And, in the process, it fails to grasp the holiness that is fundamental to the life of the Trinity, replacing it instead with an abstract and emotivistic transcendence.<sup>24</sup>

All of this is to say that Rohr's attempt to construct a spirituality of Trinity comes up short both in its account of spirituality and its account of the Trinity. Spiritually it falls short because it does not present a spirituality that is compelling for dealing with our lived and broken condition. It reads more like a kind of soft prosperity gospel in an era of Joel Osteen and Oprah than a treatise on how to grow closer to God and your neighbor in the era of Trump. Regarding the Trinity, it comes up short because it does not actually talk about the Trinity. Rather, it preaches a theology of flow that is ambiguous at best and misleading at worst. Rohr's Trinity—and accompanying concepts, such as *perichoresis*—confuses both the nature of God and the human condition. Or maybe the problem is that I, like Phil Collins, can't dance.

### *Perichoresis and Personhood*

Having said all of that, the move to connect trinitarian theology and Christian spirituality is important. What we need is an explanation of the how our convictions about the Trinity and the incarnation actually connect to our need for salvation and reunion with God. Charles Twombly's study of *perichoresis* in the theology of John Damascene, a text that is ostensibly a work of historical theology, shows us how a

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<sup>24</sup> Although Rohr is a Franciscan priest, and approvingly quotes the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as a devotee of the Franciscan theologian St. Bonaventure, Rohr seems to completely reject the medieval threefold model of spiritual ascent, which only achieves reunion with God as the third stage, having first proceeding through purgation and then illumination. Compare with Bonaventure, *The Triple Way*, trans. Peter Damien Fehlner (New Bedford, Mass.: Academy of the Immaculate, 2012), 129–130. Of course, Bonaventure did not originate this triple way. On its history, compare with Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, vol. 2 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996), 183–184; and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, trans. M. Timothea Doyle, OP, ch 15, <http://christianperfection.info/tta26.php>.

sufficiently clarified doctrine of the Trinity can illuminate both divine nature and the human condition. Twombly's slim volume, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus*, charts out the origins and ramifications of the Damascene's original contribution to Christology and Trinity. Twombly situates his study within the recent trinitarian renaissance mentioned above, but notes a distinct lack of sustained attention to the concept of *perichoresis*.<sup>25</sup>

Twombly describes the origins of *perichoresis* in explanation of the hypostatic union. The semantic range of the term, Twombly observes, entails “‘interpenetration,’ ‘coinherence,’ ‘mutual indwelling,’ and ‘mutual immanence’” (p. 1). Like *hypostasis*, it is a frequently employed and oft-misunderstood term. And yet, despite its “persistent use” and similarly persistent appeals to John of Damascus as an author of some authority on this term, Twombly laments the lack of systematic analysis of its historical origins or “John’s ongoing importance,” a situation that he sees as only contributing to further confusion (pp. 1–2).

What follows is a retrieval of the Damascene’s monumental *The Fount of Knowledge*, a three-part work, the final part being what most of us are already familiar with as *On the Orthodox Faith*. In *The Fount*, John not only “summed up the Chalcedonian tradition as it developed in the nearly three centuries after the Fourth council” (p. 2); more importantly, *The Fount* represents the heroic and precise attempt of someone living in a pluralistic context to give continued voice and clarification to a Christian doctrine that has real pedagogical value for both a student in John’s age as well as our own.

Twombly offers a delightfully clear and readable summary of the three parts of *The Fount*, weaving together his own reading of John with those of other commentators, both ancient and modern. With the Damascene, Twombly painstakingly observes and elucidates the crucial differences between the creator and creation, the triune persons, the two natures at work in the hypostatic union, and the doctrines of salvation and glorification. Lastly, he offers a chapter and epilogue that sound both instructive and cautionary notes. In chapter

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<sup>25</sup> Twombly praises, however, Emmanuel Durand’s *La périchorèse des personnes divines. Immanence mutuelle, réciprocité et communion* (Paris: Cerf, 2005). See Durand’s 2012 essay, which summarizes some of his magisterial study: “Perichoresis: A Key Concept for Balancing Trinitarian Theology,” in R. Wozniak and G. Maspero, ed., *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

4, “Perichoresis and Salvation,” he distinguishes, helpfully, between *perichoresis* and participation, and offers a corrective to what I identified as Rohr’s first confusion. John reserves *perichoresis* for relationship that pertain solely to the divine nature, and uses “participation” to indicate when the divine relationship is extended to created nature, especially when such a relationship applies to the economy of salvation (p. 94). Even more precisely, Twombly observes, pace Rohr, that creaturely participation is always in “God’s goodness,” and not in God’s essence *per se* (p. 95). In fact, it is the mystery and unknowability of God’s goodness, and the ability of the goodness to “permeate and fill all [of creation]” that serves both to elevate creation while simultaneously maintaining the distinct difference between creator and creation. “There is no question,” Twombly insists, “in John’s presentation that God does not pervade all or that that permeation somehow alters God’s essential character” (p. 95). Divine goodness is gratuitously given to the creature, lifting the creature up; but participation never changes the divine essence.

Maintaining that essential character is vital, as Twombly implies, when we consider the doctrine of sin. Whereas creation is broken by sin, and in the process loses the image of God’s all-pervasive goodness, God’s goodness as such remains *in se*. If that participation were to change both creature and creator, God’s nature would have been corrupted along with creation. Precisely because it is not, however, providence is safeguarded, as is God’s character, as well as God’s desire that all should be saved. Here we find a crucial reason to distinguish between God’s inner triune life, God’s invitation to participate in the triune life, and the actual human experience of such an invitation (participation). Although humans have lost that grace and innocence, it can be regained because God has lost nothing: neither God’s power nor God’s goodness. They remain constant, just as the gracious invitation remains constant.

Twombly concludes with an epilogue that doubles down on the mutual benefit of *perichoresis* for the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology. Under the Chalcedonian formula, the doctrine of the hypostatic union—two natures, unconfused, in one person—benefits from a similar but inverse formulation in the doctrine of the Trinity—three persons, unconfused, in one nature. Twombly asks whether the doctrine of the Trinity received similar clarification from the Christology in John of Damascus. To the extent that the perichoretic understanding of the hypostatic union allowed the Chalcedonian fathers

to posit two natures (and, for John, two wills) within the one person, so too John was able to posit three persons but one nature and one will within the Trinity. “So the respective uses of *perichoresis* in the Trinity and the Incarnation are linked in mutually supportive ways” (p. 105). On the other hand, as we have already seen, such interpenetration need not and should not apply to creation or salvation, “because *perichoresis* invariably refers to constancy in the union of the realities so united that does not encompass the fluctuation of faith and obedience represented by the human response to God” (p. 105).

Twombly adds a salutary, christological note here. By retaining the distance of nature between creator and creature, John leaves room for the work of grace, particularly the amazing grace offered in the incarnation. “The deified humanity of Christ becomes the vehicle through which Christ’s deity can be savingly offered” (p. 105). The Damascene, unlike Rohr, sees a clear distinction between God and God’s effects, his creatures. Moreover, John sees this distinction as worth preserving, and not just to protect God’s transcendence. Rather, the distance created by the perfect, infinite being of God—the fact that God is God and humans are not—actually safeguards the invitation and gratuity of grace. Because God is perfect, God can freely extend that grace by which humans are redeemed and reunited with God. A starker contrast with Rohr’s insistence that *the flow is all* could not be imagined.

The net result of *Perichoresis and Personhood* is an exposition that is overtly historical, but also attends to the theological and, indeed, spiritual relevance of the Damascene’s work, delivered in a manner that will benefit both the beginning student of theology as well as the seasoned reader returning to John’s work.

### *Conclusion: The Ramifications of Doctrine and Doxology*

I have contrasted Rohr and Twombly here in order to demonstrate the doxological and spiritual power of theological discourse. A work written for spiritual purposes to a lay audience can actually do a significant amount of speculative theological lifting; likewise, a text written for historical and systematic purposes can bear weighty spiritual fruits. Rohr, far from borrowing established doctrinal and systematic concepts for pastoral and spiritual ends, attempts several creative but confusing theological moves that have far-reaching doctrinal ramifications, several of which I have tried to elucidate here. By

contrast, Twombly's analysis privileges historical and doctrinal clarity. In the process, it offers a palpable doctrinal payoff that can and should inform Christian spiritual practice. Understanding my place before God as a sinner who is also invited to participate through grace in the divine life ought to help me cultivate both humility and gratefulness. Indeed, such an awareness ought to be the basis of that activity for which humans were made: worship.

Likewise, I have tried to demonstrate that Rohr's casual style, while potentially disarming and intimate, pulls too many punches, and suggests both a lack of confidence in his readers' intelligence and an underdeveloped or absentee doctrine of sin. Twombly, by contrast, while writing in a decidedly academic and demanding style, communicates in a manner from which even lay readers can learn. Pastors, priests, and parish leaders would do well to take works like Twombly's seriously as part of Christian formation. Parishioners deserve an accurate and humane theological education, for such doctrinal education must be part of Christian formation, a point to which I alluded above. This is not to suggest that there is a virtue in barraging parishioners with theological jargon. At its best, doctrine is not "jargon." Rather, it is a sustained and disciplined way of thinking. Doctrine is practical, as Ellen Charry and others have argued. Christian theology has always been meant to change us, "to remake us," and as a whole activity, not one in which various subfields are kept at arm's length from each other, but instead as a discourse that is simultaneously pastoral and doctrinal whose stated end is "cultivating a skilled and excellent life . . . in Christ Jesus."<sup>26</sup> Thus has Christian theology always been, as Charry demonstrates, both practical and relevant in the deepest sense: as major Christian theologians "formulated, reformulated, and revised Christian doctrine, its moral, psychological, and social implications were upper most in their minds . . . they never forgot that God was seeking to draw people to himself for their own good."<sup>27</sup>

With Charry, I suggest that today's ministers, whether parochial or academic, must work to maintain the relationship of "theology . . . to devotional life," to hold together ascetical and speculative theology, a proposal one expects would find ringing endorsement among

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<sup>26</sup> Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1997), 225–226.

<sup>27</sup> Charry, *Renewing of Your Minds*, 233.

Anglicans.<sup>28</sup> And this is nowhere more important than trinitarian teaching. Leaders, in the parish and the classroom, need to help others see that the Trinity is neither lost nor irrelevant. Yet, they also need to show that the doctrine's relevance is not necessarily in its correlation to contemporary issues, but rather in the triune God's ability to change us. Rohr's proposal, by contrast, works to undo the ascetical, mystagogical, and doxological treasure that is Christian doctrine. By misconstruing and short-circuiting the doctrine of the trinitarian relations, he undercuts the viability of an authentically trinitarian devotion. By engaging works like Twombly's *Perichoresis and Personhood*, pastors and teachers can not only correct the damaging effects of Rohr's wayward theology, but help reestablish the pastoral and ascetic unity and relevance of trinitarian doctrine.

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<sup>28</sup> Charry, *Renewing of Your Minds*, 240.