

# THEOLOGY AS BOTH/AND CONVERSATION

Abilene Christian University Graduate School of Theology

Tyler Priest

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## **Theology**

Theology is conversation. Within this conversation, we find ourselves coming to a table of generosity where every Christ follower is welcomed to share in understanding the nature of the communal God. At the outset, our theological mission can be defined as a dialogue of “faith seeking understanding” that encompasses a diversity of reflections upon the revelation of God. Conversation implies relationality, and no other space than the table offers such an inviting arena for the community of God to participate.

Theological conversation joins with the first spoken words of God in the Judeo-Christian story: “Let there be light.” Theology always begins with faith, and by nature this faith seeks to understand its source in the fullness of the light of God. Thus theology is the conversation of faith.

Conversation assumes a plurality of voices around the table. This plurality is two-dimensional. First, from within the Christian community there is room at the table for many people, at which all are given corresponding room to speak. Karl Barth writes, “In the Church of Jesus Christ there can and should be no non-theologians.” Thus, the full Christian community, regardless of imposed categorization (gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc.) finds a space at the table of God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, speaking of God has been relegated to an elite class of accomplished scholars. The table of theology blurs academic, gender, and other distinctions and makes room for all to engage, thus imaging forth Trinitarian conversation.

Theology is never a monologue, but takes on a dialogical paradigm of synergetic force. No written or spoken work of theology should ever be attributed to one pen, but to multiple contributors from as many contexts. Theology is an ongoing communal endeavor of interdependence.<sup>2</sup> Scripture involves a multiplicity of voices and pens; so too does theology. Indeed, Scripture is theology<sup>3</sup> and is both the primary starting point and contributor to our theological language. Yet Scripture alone fails to grasp the breadth of the theological task as an ongoing conversation. So too, theology ultimately fails in any attempt to thoroughly systematize the revelation of God, as such a task involves more dimensions than can be perceived. Yet such conversation must be had. Articulation is the faithful response to the life-giving revelation of God—life is perpetuated at the table of conversation.

The second dimension of plurality exists within the voices of Scripture and tradition, cultural context, and communal/personal experience. Scripture apart from tradition ends the conversation prematurely within the Christian community. Tradition apart from the return to Scripture saws off the limb upon which we are perched. Thus theology done from scratch is not theology. Rather, in Scripture and tradition we receive a rich inheritance that elicits a faithful response. Theological efforts that attempt to deny this gift are too impoverished to begin a sustainable conversation.

Cultural contexts as well as communal and personal experiences necessarily have a place at the table of theology. Theology cannot be exercised in a vacuum devoid of the

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<sup>2</sup> The nature of biblical authorship and transmission itself assumes various pens, even within singular works. Our sacred texts have passed through the hands of various redactors and scribes, all representing their respective communities.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the book of James theologically reflects upon the Sermon on the Mount within a new context. The Sermon on the Mount reflects upon the Mosaic Law within a new context. And as we have it today, after passing through various contexts, the Mosaic Law has layers of interpretation within itself, and is thus a work of theology.

experiential or the contextual, because antecedent revelation does not come in such a manner. The highest means of revelation, the Incarnation, intersected (and continues to intersect) amidst space and time, culture and people, propelling contextually based theology. This is not to say that revelation is empty of cross-cultural or enduring objectivity, but because of the span of many cultures, a more robust understanding of God becomes possible. When the plurality of voices at the table are each given a space for sharing, theology becomes well informed, balanced, and meaningful in its present context.

Theology images creation as an ongoing work of cultivation. As creation unfolds in a trajectory toward the consummation of life in God, so does theology. Being a continuous task, theological conversation should find itself connected to the primal conversation in Genesis<sup>4</sup>, rather than a nouveau construct having a modern beginning point. In this sense, theology is deeply historical and reaches back to the revealed beginnings of history itself. At the same time, theology is fresh and imaginative. As life with God unfolds, we find ourselves asking new questions and grappling with new realities. This results in a movement toward a coherent expression of the nature of God in the context in which we find ourselves. Paradoxically, we can say nothing new about God while at the same time discover new dimensionality and terrain within God's life.

The task of the theologian can be more aptly seen as the work of an artist. The palette of colors before her represents the various components that make up theology, some having more visual presence and weight than others; some tones nuance the background while others thrust into the foreground, catching the attention of the eye and

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the creation account in Genesis records a conversation with God that seems more like dialogue than monologue. "Let there be" implies permission—the Trinity conversing both within itself and with the void of the cosmos itself.

illuminating a particular nature of God. More akin to a form of art, systematic theology fails to function as a science. Such a task would assert propositions that can be tested and proven true/false in a cold, non-relational, even faithless manner. This rules out the validity of two types of theology: propositional theology<sup>5</sup>, which attempts to crystallize doctrines in a relation-less cultural vacuum, and secular theology, which internally contradicts itself by the means of disconnected scientific inquiry from the community which receives and generates the revelation of God.

Because God has not and will not cease to act in the world and be present amidst his community, theology as reflection is an unfolding task. Despite our best attempts, an unfinished journey with God will not solidify into timeless dogma. Again and again our faith comes to the table for life-sustaining conversation; this conversation is theology.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Nature of God**

God is not “God.” The aforementioned subject represented by the means of language cannot be grasped in words, whether spoken or written. That which is written or spoken of as “God” merely represents our thoughts of the divine reality and by no means could ever capture the actuality of God. Our subject cannot be defined by mere words, and thus God is not simply “God.” Further, conceptions of “God,” in their finitude, fail to contain the infinite. If the parts are inadequate (words), so too is the whole (concept). We are caught in tension, struggling to speak of something non-definable that we have surely

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<sup>5</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 7.

<sup>6</sup> It is implicit in the talk of “table” that I am making an argument that the task of theology is a Eucharistic act that simultaneously deepens the relationality it seeks to explore. Such thoughts on “eucharistic ecclesiology” and theology are explored by John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1985), Introduction, 80-82.

experienced. Peter Rollins contends that typically what is regarded as Anselm's definition of God is in reality a non-definition offering no positive attributes, instead negating that which God is not:

“Therefore, Lord, you are not merely that than which a greater cannot be thought; you are something greater than can be thought. For since it is possible to think that such a being exists, then if you are not that being, it is possible to think something greater than you. But that is impossible.”<sup>7</sup>

In attempting to find a grammar with which to speak of God, we need another language. It is understood, especially among Christian missionaries who acquire a new language to engage a foreign culture, that a shallow understanding of the “second language” frees one to worship and encounter God through words whose meaning is not singularly or fully understood. Such non-understanding leads to a fuller sense of the transcendent nature that is not merely “God.” Moreover, in struggling with a new language, words are given more meaning than in the mother tongue. Words regain their meaning and carry due weight, at least within the moment. Still, we become comfortable with words and their meanings, and slowly, verbal concepts lose their initial velocity. God cannot be gotten at by words alone. Because our subject is by nature objective (standing outside space and time), it follows that the realm of language, which is bound up in culture and even given meaning by culture, is inadequate for the task.<sup>8</sup>

Silence, it would seem, is a beautiful and most appropriate response to God who is too powerful to be tamed by words. It is in silence that the conversation ceases to be about “us,” our ends, our means, our wants, our power. At last, as Sarah Coakley writes,

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Peter Rollins, *How Not to Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2006), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Grenz, 62-63. Grenz explores the idea of “God is subject, not object,” and yet this is not to say that God is not objective. Our encounter of God can only be via subjective means, in which humans are the object. Yet God stands outside of human experience as an objective reality.

“we cease to set the agenda if we ‘make space’ for God to be God.”<sup>9</sup> Our monologues no longer dominate the conversation and the self is put at bay. The nothingness of silence reigns over the noise of the contentious ego. Chaos is harnessed, and only God speaks: “Peace. Be still.”

Yet much ink has been spilled in the name of that of which cannot be grasped by words.<sup>10</sup> This speaks to the reality that on some level, conversation has happened and will continue to happen. If we do not speak of God, we are left only with absolute silence, which does neither our Subject nor our neighbor nor ourselves justice. Yet that which has been experienced, although evoking silent awe, is still too great to harness with either silence or words. Let us then, in view of our great Subject, offer both silence and words, both dumbfounded awe and intentional conversation, both of which are means of communion.

If pushed to say that God is positively something rather than what God is not, let us say that God is both/and. God is both one and three. God is both transcendent and immanent, merciful and just, lover and judge. God is both sovereign and generous in freedom, invisible and revealed, silent and conversant. God by nature creates and holds life in tension in an intricate balance of relationality. Within this web, we find ourselves grappling within this tension toward a coherent understanding of the God of both/and. Thus, God is both God and not “God.” This paradox pushes us into a way of

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 34.

<sup>10</sup> God’s initial conversation with Moses in Exodus 3 makes this clear. “I AM WHO I AM” defies the confines of a name and makes an ontological statement that is fully consistent with the nature of God as the supreme being. Further, “YHWH” lacks vowels necessary for pronunciation and guards the mysterious silence of God’s nature.

understanding God that makes room for the boundless nature that is God. Not merely a subject defined in negative terms, indeed God *is*.

Because God is both/and, our response to God is a both/and response: both silence and conversation. We have already said that theology is conversation. Where, then, is there room for silence within such a theological framework? Silence is implicit in reflection upon the God-experience, which lies at the root of every theological enterprise. Such an encounter of God produces a response of silent awe that transcends our linguistic and even cognitive faculties, yet that paradoxically launches one into conversation and participation in the life of God. In silence, we are held, while in conversation, we hold.<sup>11</sup>

It is here that we converse on the nature of God. Understanding this nature is integral to the Christian faith when it is understood that indeed communion with God is our religious end. Mark Heim notes, “Salvation is colored at every point by the character of the one who encounters us.”<sup>12</sup> Put simply, living into the nature of God is salvation. The journey with God and the destination are not two distinct concepts; the journey is the destination, both the means and the end. So, because of the two pivotal doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, we are able to know God, and to know God as both/and.

The doctrine of the Trinity maintains that God is both one and three persons simultaneously. Grenz summarizes this mysterious reality with a fourfold maxim: “‘God is one,’ ‘God is three,’ ‘God is a diversity,’ ‘God is a unity.’”<sup>13</sup> Looking at each statement individually, we begin to see the profundity and depth of the foundational and

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<sup>11</sup> Rollins, 2.

<sup>12</sup> S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 59.

<sup>13</sup> Grenz, 85.

distinctive doctrine of the Trinity. “God is one” has its revolutionary roots within the Hebrew tradition and is not an exclusive attribute of the Christian deity. Other monotheistic religions challenge this paradox, usually on the grounds of Jesus’ divinity.

Still, Christians are not tritheists, nor any other form of polytheism. In the Church’s early days in the Roman Empire, she was referred to as a religious movement of “atheists” because of her hard rejection of Empire-mandated polytheism and declaration of Caesar as Lord. Today, rejection of the existence of one God is now dubbed “atheism,” as Christendom hardly allowed the mainstream belief of monotheism to be challenged for hundreds of years until the age of modernity.

“God is three” affirms the distinct persons of the Trinity. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each in their own right entities of the godhead. Each person within the triune God fulfills an economic purpose in the world: the Son makes right the disorder of sin, the Holy Spirit makes right the disorder of evil, and the Father makes right the disorder of death within all creation.<sup>14</sup> However, it should be understood that ontologically, God exists in three persons apart from any economic evidence or temporal purpose. Yet because of such economics, we are saved in a plurality of dimensions corresponding to persons within the Trinity. In God’s saving activity, we can see the both/and moving beyond conservative Protestantism’s emphasis of sin forgiveness and the liberal Protestant emphasis of eradicating social evil. To this polarity, the Trinity says, “Both/and,” and calls the Christian community to image such a reality now, while also promising life over death in the consummation of all things. Both faith and love, along with hope, are the liberating means of Trinitarian salvation.

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<sup>14</sup> Heim, 60.

“God is diversity” declares the distinctions within God. Plurality is imaged in God’s creation of humanity as witnessed by the vast ethnicities, geographies, genetic variants, and languages that fill the earth. Indeed, within God is a celebration of difference rather than a monochromatic expression of the divine. The implications of diversity within God’s nature are powerful, as seen in Heim’s breakthrough conversation on religious ends in the investigatory work *Depth of the Riches*. Love of diversity is implicit within God’s nature and hints toward generosity rather than condemnation for those who image God in different fashions other than orthodox Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Such generosity will be explored later.

“God is unity” speaks to the singular character and essence of God. There is no chaos in the community of the godhead, but rather each distinct person shares the same essence of love that defines the Christian God. Borrowing an analogy from Heim, harmony is the audible result of different instruments playing one piece in unison. In this sense, harmony cannot be achieved when instruments are on different pages, different tempos, or in different keys. Unity is essential to the nature of God.

As can be seen by the discussion above, it is impossible to discuss oneness without speaking of three-ness, as it is impossible to discuss diversity without speaking of unity. Because Trinitarian “communion-in-difference”<sup>16</sup> is the center of God’s being, God is more aptly described as both/and, as opposed to the factious paradigm of either/or, which is non-relational and disconnecting. If a subject is both/and, it is by nature relational and affirming of a correlation between two entities. Both/and says “Yes” and “Yes” to the relationship of two seemingly opposed or improbable entities. Sometimes

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<sup>15</sup> Still, as Heim argues, the Christian end is to be sought above all others.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 62.

God's "Yes" causes the Christian community to rethink her particular way of seeing reality. Inclusivity is a mark of the both/and nature of God. God is both the God of the Jew and Gentile, the slave and the free, the male and the female. Discovery of this attribute often creates an element of surprise, as so often, Christian community has struggled to shed the distinctions that create unhealthy dichotomies. Unity of the Church images forth the unity of the Godhead.

As both one and three, the Trinity informs our understanding of the two-sided nature of truth. The oneness of God functions on an objective, universal level, while the three-ness of God functions on a subjective, particular level in dealing with economical issues. In this stream of thought, we find that truth is both/and as both subjective and objective, standing both inside and outside of human experience. Jesus' own claim to be the truth takes on particular and universal dimensions. He becomes the embodiment of truth to those who believe in him, and outside of human comprehension he embodies the truth, whether anyone believes or not.

Such a doctrine of one-in-three defies mathematical logic itself. One is one, and not three. Conversely, three can only equal three, and not one. Rather than being an illogical concept, it is relationality that allows such an enigmatic tension, as the Trinity is purely relational. God dwells in community and indeed is community. Coexistence, mutuality, and harmony are all words that attempt to get at this divine nature. One-in-three unity-in-diversity is the very ideal which the church strives to embody. In coming to the Godhead we are bound up in complexity, for although God is one, God is not a simple God. This reality is further understood in the doctrine of the Incarnation, from which Trinitarian theology derives its life.

The Incarnation images the Trinity as plurality-in-unity. Just as three are one in the Trinity, two are one in the Incarnation. Heim calls the incarnate word the “exteriorization” of the same divine pattern established in the Trinity.<sup>17</sup> These two doctrines are fully consistent in their interactive nature and sustain dynamic relationality.

In Jesus, God is both God and man. This fundamental assertion of the Incarnation is what puts Christianity at odds with her monotheistic neighbors, as the distinct entities of human and divine are thought impossible to be brought together into one body and being. The Creator God would never debase God to the point of becoming a part of creation. But rather than an unsightly event, in the Incarnation we see paradox blossom into beauty.<sup>18</sup> God is both pre-existent and born into life. God is both finite and infinite, both all-powerful and limited to the body of a man. God is both invisible and seen. And on Holy Saturday, God is both dead and living. God is both/and.

“Incarnation” in itself is a Christological confession.<sup>19</sup> Declared within this word is that Jesus was the very *logos* who became flesh. This both/and unity of word and flesh leads to preexistence. Such a discovery can be made only after reflection upon the life of Jesus who boldly declared that he is indeed God.<sup>20</sup> Within the Christian witness, the Incarnation is the greatest central event of history as we are connected with God in a dynamic way not understood before.

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<sup>17</sup> Heim, 56.

<sup>18</sup> The historical development of doctrine of the Incarnation was, however, an ugly one. Such paradox was not readily embraced or reconciled. Heresies abounded and continue to abound.

<sup>19</sup> Grenz, 405.

<sup>20</sup> Yet Jesus also danced around this self-confession, for to say such in the open would have heightened the persecution he was already enduring. “Boldly” is to say that his actions bore this confession as much as any statement he made.

The Incarnation proclaims the deep connectedness between God and man that has existed from the beginning of the Judeo-Christian story. Indeed, God created man and woman in the *imago dei*, giving his image-bearers a unique capacity for relationality with the divine that no other part of creation shares. “In our image” implies something deeper than physical qualities, but a connectedness in spirit that reveals the very purpose for creation itself. Just as God shares divinity in three persons, so God shares the divine image in the humanity of Jesus. Jesus then makes participation in the life of God possible through his perfect connectedness of heaven and earth that was consummated in his death and resurrection.

Because of the resurrection, relationality is secured beyond this life for humanity both in a vertical and horizontal sense. Here the relationality secured is both/and in two senses, both to God and human, and both temporal and eternal. Death no longer has the final word in our relationships, whether to God or each other, despite such a transitory sense brought on by bodily death. This is the glory of both/and nature of God at work, both today and tomorrow.

Relationality with God through the Incarnation is both the means and the end. In Buddhist traditions, an opposing understanding of relationality takes form in putting forth people as a means, but not an end. This is articulated in the hyperbolic proverb expressed in some Buddhist streams: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.”<sup>21</sup> Strangely, this is precisely the route that Jews and Romans took in killing Jesus. Christ was met on the road, and they killed him, fully opposing the nature of life-giving relationality that is God. But rather than this act killing relationality, it propelled such a dimension between God and the new humanity. The death of God created space for the resurrection to make

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Heim, 57.

all things new, and the impossibility of life made a way for a new type of life. While the Buddha is of no significance after functioning as teacher, Christ is of full significance as the end of the Christian religion.

### **Interreligious Dialogue**

The both/and conversation necessarily extends beyond the Christian community and into the arena of world religions. Rather than seeing herself as a competitor attempting to win inter-religious arguments, the Church is most faithful to God in bearing witness to the Trinitarian nature of “community-in-difference.” In the Incarnation, we see that God becomes man not simply for those who would mentally assent to such a belief, but for all humanity, for from a divine perspective primal human relationality goes beyond religious affiliation and sees the very substance of every human being as the image of God.

Before going into depth here, it is acknowledged that Ecumenical relationships (both within Protestantism and in catholicity) must flourish before turning outward to engage other religions. When communion with the Trinity is not imaged, the ends of our religion cannot be clearly presented as a viable alternative—our orthopraxis must take precedence before discussing orthodoxy with others. Assuming this precedence, it is possible to move into conversation beyond our faith community, credibly entering into dialogue with other faiths.

It has been commonly said that the Reformation created a splintering effect in breaking away from the Roman Catholic church. This is often understood in a negative light. But perhaps denominationalism, in its messiness, images the “difference” in the nature of the Trinity. Is not God too complex to be captured within one ecclesiology?

What if various expressions of triune community reveal the nuanced complexity of the Trinity? This would certainly help us make sense of such a seeming breakdown in Christian unity through history.<sup>22</sup>

There is a fine line that must be balanced in ecumenical dialogue. Especially in its nascent days, the Christian tradition was forged by defining itself *against* heretical movements. In protecting the one-ness of our faith, inclusivity can err in heresy and homogeneity of the Godhead, while exclusivity can err in a failure to embrace the diversity of community that is God. The same is true on the level of inter-religious dialogue. Again, the Christian community finds herself in tension, attempting to faithfully speak of God with all her neighbors.

Seeing inclusivity and exclusivity both as dead ends in the conversation, we turn to Heim's "third way" that blazes a path between these two options. Religious pluralism is this third way. Religious pluralism simply affirms, "You shall reap what you sow." Alternative religious ends are real—other religions happen. It is now not a matter of argument against, but articulation within. The Christian religious end must articulate itself not as the only religious alternative, but as the "best" alternative.<sup>23</sup>

As globalization becomes an increasing reality, inter-religious dialogue must be given more theological reflection. The intersections of world religions are abounding in urban areas, and such diversity should be embraced all the more so in a world climate of

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<sup>22</sup> This does not make room for bickering and fighting within the Christian community. While admittedly the stakes of the doctrine of God are always high, the Trinity must be imaged with special regard to oneness in the midst of any doctrinal difference.

<sup>23</sup> Still, the word "best" does not image the cooperative unity of the Trinity, but instead smacks of competitive dialogue that is not of God's nature. If pushed to answer what constitutes "best," I argue again that "best" is only understood via the means and end of Christianity, viz. the nature of God. Further, Heim notes on p. 44, "There is no reason to avoid this judgment, as long as we realize that other traditions make similar reciprocal judgments about the supremacy of their religious end."

religious tension. Indeed, dialogue implies the act of listening, something that when avoided will quickly end the conversation. Understood in listening is the home tradition being able to see from a different perspective, rather than staying within the comforts of such a home, upholding previous biases and ignoring any challenge from outside.

Personally, I have taken steps toward a more robust ecumenical conversation because of my theological commitments. The past two summers I have spent working with Disciples' Fellowship,<sup>24</sup> a community in Birmingham, AL, in conversation with Catholic, Evangelical, and Church of Christ communities. Such freedom in communion has been a refreshing and hopeful picture of the future of ecumenism. In terms of interfaith dialogue beyond Christianity, Heim's book has both affirmed some assumptions and challenged others. In part because of a monochromatic religious context, engaging in deep conversation with fellow travelers headed toward other religious ends has happened only in a few isolated events. However, in the future I see myself going out of the way to pursue such dialogue, knowing that other voices have integrity that although outside Christianity, can shape my understanding of Christ himself. In all theological conversation, I hope to understand this God who is both God and not "God."

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<sup>24</sup> see [www.disciplesfellowship.com](http://www.disciplesfellowship.com)

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