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***AN ONTOLOGY FOR PRACTICAL  
WISDOM:  
PROCESS PHILOSOPHY MEETS RADICAL  
ORTHODOXY?***

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**T**his essay began as a brief outline for a 1993 lecture in an

introductory philosophy course. It has grown in fits and starts over the succeeding years. I have kept returning to it, and tinkering with it, because I keep realizing that this still represents pretty much how I think about what is real, and it allows me to appreciate a wide range of other approaches. I have tried to smooth out some of the fits and starts, but it may still appear uneven at times, for which I apologize.

I call this an “ontology for practical wisdom” because it is an outgrowth of previous philosophical and theological work I have done on the concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as the most fundamental and inclusive way of making sense of things, from which all other ways of sense-making derive whatever merits they may legitimately claim. More specifically, practical wisdom is “*the historically implicated, communally nurtured ability to make good sense of relatively singular contexts in ways appropriate to their*

*relative singularity.*<sup>1</sup> As I will indicate below, practical wisdom can also be defined as a *relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances*. This activity is similar to what the radically orthodox would call “non-identical repetition” (more about that later).<sup>2</sup>

I offer these reflections here to help clarify why one can be an appreciative reader of intellectual movements such as process philosophy and radical orthodoxy without necessarily belonging wholeheartedly to either school.<sup>3</sup> I single out those movements simply because they seem to have intrigued me most over the years. Process philosophy used to be the principal conversation partner on matters metaphysical, and the ontology I am offering first arose as a response to that movement. Radical orthodoxy is a much more recent conversation partner. I find both movements vexing at times, yet incredibly illuminating at others. But my own stance remains, not radically orthodox, but radically confessional, and for the record, I was describing myself in those terms several years before anyone

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<sup>1</sup>For more on this subject see Charles W. Allen, “The Primacy of *Phronesis*,” *Journal of Religion* 69 (1989): 359–74.

<sup>2</sup>For more on radical orthodoxy, see Allen, “Radical Orthodoxy in the Parish, or Postmodern Critical Augustinianism for Dummies,” *Encounter* 64, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 219–29.

<sup>3</sup>This is probably where I tend to disagree at least somewhat with the stance(s) taken in Catherine Keller and Anne Daniell, eds., *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Poststructuralist Postmodernisms* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), where radical orthodoxy is described dismissively as hardly worthy of conversation (see, for example, pp. 23–24). It is understandable why the radically orthodox provoke this kind of response, given their own tendency to dismiss practically everybody else. But their movement seems too instructive to ignore, and their LGBT-friendly socialism can hardly be dismissed, *pace* Keller and Daniell, as sheer conservatism (24). Otherwise, this is a commendable collection of essays that (finally!) takes poststructuralism more seriously than David Ray Griffin ever knew how to do.

coined the term “radical orthodoxy.”<sup>4</sup> I think “radical confession-  
alism” is a more apt label for the path I continue to follow, one which  
I will say a little more about at the end of this paper. One advantage  
of radical confession-ism is that I can afford to be a bit recreational  
about offering and defending any kind of ontology. Reading this essay  
may not seem very recreational, but believe it or not, writing it  
definitely was.

Let me simply stipulate what an ontological move involves. It  
is not sheer speculation. It is a situated attempt to portray whatever  
features we notice that seem to be involved in any situation we can  
imagine. It is an attempt to say what widely diverse contexts may  
nevertheless have in common in a way that does justice to their  
diversity. Done correctly, it does not lose track of who and where we  
are when we make these moves. Done correctly, it opens a space for  
people who see things differently to engage one another in

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<sup>4</sup>See Allen, “The Primacy of *Phronesis*,” 370–71; “Faith, Reason and  
Public Life: Are They Compatible?” *Encounter* 55, no. 3 (Summer 1994):  
244–45.

conversation and learn from the engagement. That is not a negligible outcome.<sup>5</sup>

If forced to summarize the ontology I am proposing in a single sentence, I would state the following: reality is a lively web of relative singularities, none of them completely separate, none of them wholly confused, all of them differently interpermeable. A more detailed outline appears below. Some predictable questions and responses follow.

### **The Ontology in Outline**

- Reality is most coherently and holistically described as a network of relatively singular instances (that network itself being one of those instances).
- No such instances exist apart from their relations with other instances. They are *relatively* singular.

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<sup>5</sup>Along with the work of Stephen E. Toulmin, I remain indebted here to David Tracy's "analogical imagination," which I have elsewhere summarized as follows: "What ultimately sustains [Tracy's] trust and hope in conversation is a strategy he has come to describe as an 'analogical imagination.' Its credibility seems to depend on a number of convictions which, Tracy admits, are finally theological. Those convictions can, I think, be summarized in the following three statements: 1) There are real differences among us which are often dangerous. 2) They may not, and in some cases definitely should not, lend themselves to complete resolution or satisfactory explanation. 3) Ultimately, however, people (and things) still have enough in common to enable and demand working for practically viable, if tension-fraught, varieties of solidarity in both our understanding and our common life." From Allen, "Between Revisionists and Postliberals," *Encounter* 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1990): 396. See also David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987). Understood in this way, I do not see how Tracy's analogical imagination differs from the "analogical worldview" of radically orthodox theologian Graham Ward in his *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 257–60. For Toulmin, see *Human Understanding*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990); and *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

- All such instances involve more than their relations with others. They are relatively *singular*.
- As relatively singular *instances*, all these are more or less occasional instantiations of their relations and of themselves (set theory be damned).<sup>6</sup> While they do illustrate more general properties, they are always more than mere illustrations.
- The relationships between the relativity (or relationality) and singularity of a given instance are inescapably *tensive*: neither is precisely the same as the other, nor is either completely different from the other. All attempts to specify precisely how they are related or distinct will at least implicitly presuppose this very tension<sup>7</sup> that they aim to resolve.
- But our ability to recognize this indicates that such tensions are not the nonsensical self-contradictions of formal logic. Reality does not dissolve into an endless play of differences where nothing ever gets resolved. (At the very least we have to affirm what Stephan Körner calls the “weak principle of contradiction,”<sup>8</sup> which holds that not every statement is true, or in Hilary Putnam’s version, that not every statement is both true and false.<sup>9</sup>)

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<sup>6</sup>I am referring here to the attempts among logicians in the last century to avoid paradoxes by introducing theories of “types” and prohibitions against self-referential statements. The justification for this, however, is an assumption that all types of imprecision and vagueness need to be replaced by precise equivalents, even though the very process of finding such replacements could not itself be precise. For more on this, see Hilary Putnam, “Vagueness and Alternative Logic,” in *Realism and Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 271–86.

<sup>7</sup>The radically orthodox might pounce on any suggestion that “tensiveness” is built into the very structure of things. Have I yielded to an “ontology of violence”? I don’t regard all tensions, discordances, or dissonance as violent, however. Perhaps they are in keeping with Gregory of Nyssa’s theme of constantly “straining after” infinite goodness, a theme greatly popular among the radically orthodox. See Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), 1.1-10 (pp. 29–31).

<sup>8</sup>Stephan Körner, *Metaphysics: Its Structure and Function* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 10.

<sup>9</sup>Putnam, 98–114.

- For an instance to count as relatively singular there must be a kind of coherence to it (not a strict, formal consistency) every bit as fundamental as any tensions it might display.
- The relationship between such tensiveness and coherence is itself both tensive and coherent (or coherently tensive and tensively coherent—in the vein of Ricoeur’s “discordant concordance”).
- In abstraction from full engagement with constantly shifting, relatively singular contexts, we find many aspects of reality amenable to the strictly formal operations of traditional, truth-functional logic. But these remain partial abstractions from reality in its full concreteness. Put more cryptically, the logic of identity and subordination follows what could be called a more dynamic logic of selfhood (“ipseity”) and interpermeability.<sup>10</sup>
- Thus we may distinguish between universals and particulars and for many purposes treat both as stable realities. But we must not overlook the fact that intelligently relating a universal to a particular situation requires noting how the situation in all its particularity seems to call for that particular universal in its own particular way. In practice, then, universals are chock-full of particularity. Conversely, any attempt even to think of what distinguishes particulars from universals and from one another must rely upon universals in order to do so. So in practice particulars are chock-full of universality.
- All reference to universals is but an aspect of relatively singular instances of relating relatively singular instances to one another; and all reference to particulars is but an aspect of relatively singular instances of distinguishing relatively singular instances from one another; and relating and distinguishing are themselves but two sides of the “same” tensive coin.

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<sup>10</sup>See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2–3. Note, however, that I am not suggesting we simply replace “classical” or traditional logic with some of the trendier alternative logics (fuzzy logic, for example). As Susan Haack has observed, most candidates for “alternative” logics wind up trying to replace the imprecision they find in everyday contexts with a new series of precise, formal operations, without paying attention to the inherent imprecision involved in that very process. See Susan Haack, *Philosophy of Logics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 168; *Deviant Logic, Fuzzy Logic: Beyond the Formalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), ix–xix. There may be better candidates for the abstract formalism of classical logic (whatever we mean by “classical”), but this is a debate in which I do not see any need to take sides.

- In fact, we do not know of anything altogether beyond relatively singular instances of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances.
- From this we can plausibly hazard a more dynamic understanding of reality, not just as a network of relatively singular instances, but as itself a relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances. (But given the elusiveness of the terminology here, we should not say that this conclusion follows with strict necessity from the preceding reflections.)
- Since practical wisdom can itself be alternately defined as a relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances, we could then say that this is not only an ontology *for* practical wisdom, but an ontology *of* practical wisdom.

### **Does radicalizing practical wisdom require an ontology?**

The only practically wise answer I can give is a colloquial “sort of.” That is, radicalizing practical wisdom “sort of” requires a “sort of” ontology or metaphysics (i.e., an account of “how things, in the largest sense of the term, hang together, in the largest sense of the term”<sup>11</sup>). I have to use these peculiar hedges because, if I am to take my own account of reasoning seriously, no (or at least very few) ontological conclusions follow with the strict necessity of a logician’s formal operations, and the only ontological affirmations I am willing to make might be considered too vague or ambiguous to be worthy of being called an ontology. Furthermore, other affirmations in tension with these might also be suggested. Nevertheless, insofar as practical wisdom involves taking the fullest possible account of what we are doing *as* we do it, it already qualifies as a “sort of” transcendental move. So I do think the position I have staked out in “The Primacy of *Phronesis*” calls for assertions such as these (and note that when I say it “calls for” such assertions I mean to say more than that these assertions are merely optional, without going so far as to say that my position strictly implies such assertions).

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<sup>11</sup>The phrase is attributed to Wilfred Sellars in Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 29.

### **Does radicalizing practical wisdom *permit* an ontology?**

Obviously if it “sort of” requires one then it “sort of” permits one. It does not, however, encourage ontological moves that are too likely to detract from our practical, confessionally radical engagement with relatively singular contexts, communities, or institutions. As I have argued in “The Primacy of *Phronesis*” and elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> transcendental, ontological, or metaphysical moves (call them what we will) cannot be divorced from the practice of confessing the truths that claim us most radically. But insofar as they help us to pay better attention to what we are doing as we do it, they are not to be rejected as intrinsically foundationalist, imperialist, or patriarchal, but are instead to be welcomed for the precarious exercises that they are. They are, of course, hazardous and can turn oppressive, but so can anything else we do.

### **Will such ontological moves rob Christian faith of its distinctiveness?**

Not these moves. (Well, not automatically.) While these ontological assertions do not refer specifically to Christian faith, they have been radically influenced all along by at least one peculiar rendition (i.e., mine) of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here is a summary of that rendition as it currently stands:

Because I am a Christian, I find my and others’ [lives] tellingly described and critiqued in the biblical narratives. But these are also “narratives of a vulnerable God,”<sup>13</sup> a God whose radically self-giving life with us is...an

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<sup>12</sup>Allen, “Faith, Reason and Public Life: Are They Compatible?” 237–51.

<sup>13</sup>While we do not always agree, William C. Placher’s work by that title still strikes me as one of the most persuasive portrayals of the biblical narratives. See William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

eccentric<sup>14</sup> and redemptively broken communion, focused and lived out with an irreplaceable intensity in the life, death, and risen life of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>15</sup> Our creaturely eccentricity and brokenness are thus embraced, transfigured, and drawn into an even deeper, unending eccentricity that we know as the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ, broken for us. This is the only God we know. And the God identified in these narratives may be even more eccentric, and more redemptively broken, than we are—a God whose very self is not a private, self-contained commodity but an open dynamism of self-giving, at once, and interpermeably, the Giver, the Gift, and the Giving.<sup>16</sup> This is a God whose very self exists, not behind, but in and through the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ, a God whose self, let's say, is centered eccentrically. And God draws creatures to reflect, in their own eccentric ways, the eccentric relationality that God already is, each of us in our own way eccentric centers of our shared worlds.<sup>17</sup>

Nothing in these ontological moves prevents me from affirming all of this without reservation. For me the original and greatest conceivable

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<sup>14</sup>By "eccentric" I mean "off-centered," "out from the center," "outgoing," etc., as implied by God's self-giving and creatures' summons to self-giving.

<sup>15</sup>I do not see any need to use Jesus's irreplaceability as a trump card to play in interfaith dialogue, especially a dialogue involving Judaism. God's eccentric and broken communion is certainly focused and lived out with an irreplaceable intensity in God's enduring covenant with Israel. Ironically, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity reflects, at least indirectly, the recognition that neither of these covenantal relations can be superseded, nor can one be subordinate to the other. This sets in place a noncompetitive precedent for dialogue with other religious traditions as well.

<sup>16</sup>For a fruitful development of the terminology of self-giving, see Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup>Allen, "Embracing the Gospel—Ordaining the Eccentric," *Encounter* 64, no. 4 (Autumn 2003): 378.

“relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances” turns out to be the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, these ontological moves are elastic enough to be of use to people who do not have to share exactly the same confessional starting point.<sup>18</sup> That does not make them more “reality-depicting” than the more peculiar affirmations of a specific faith community. In other words, this ontology may allow me to speak of the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ as the original “relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances,” but that more technical formulation is not a superior or more directly referential replacement for the God identified in specifically Christian terms. Rather, asserting a “tensive coherence” between the two formulations allows each to illuminate the other. To the extent that they do seem genuinely to illuminate each other, one might say that both become more “reality-depicting” than they would have been apart from each other. But that does not rob either formulation of its own peculiar referential power.

### **Will such ontological moves “domesticate” God’s transcendence?**

No, not if *phronesis* retains its primacy. While there is a sense in which I, like Whitehead, wind up making God the “chief exemplification” (or “instantiation”) of these ontological assertions, I repudiate the likely charge that my ontological moves domesticate God’s transcendence.<sup>19</sup> As my rendering of *phronesis* implies (sort of), “to exemplify” or “to instantiate” does not necessarily mean “to be subordinate to.” It might mean as much if we were operating with a binary logic of strict identity and subordination. But (as mentioned

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<sup>18</sup>For example, they may be of use, as process philosophy has been, in dialogue between Christians (and other theists) and Buddhists. See, for example, John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives, eds., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990).

<sup>19</sup>See William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 7–10.

previously) I have relativized that logic to a more fundamental logic of selfhood (“ipseity”) and interpermeation (or *perichoresis*).

Even if I identify God as the chief “relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances,” I am not arguing that God differs from the rest of us only in degree, rather than in kind. That is because *a crucial point of this ontology is to deny that any genuine difference can ever really be just a difference in degree.*

Also, because the more fundamental logic at work here is not one that involves strict entailments (but only “sort of” entailments), there may be room for what more traditional theologians want to preserve about the gratuity of creation. Creation is a fitting outcome for an originary relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively singular instances. It may even be “sort of” “called for” by that originary instance. But it is not strictly entailed.

### **How do these ontological moves compare with process philosophy?**

Loosely speaking, the ontology I am proposing qualifies as a kind of process ontology. Where it differs from the ontologies of Whitehead and Hartshorne is in its skepticism about process philosophy’s attempts to present itself as a formally coherent account of “becoming.” So far as I can tell, no such account (as opposed to a “tensively coherent” account) is possible. While they may not be held by all process thinkers, *I specifically reject or at least question the following tenets:*

- that genuine becoming can be strictly self-identical even for a moment;
- that there must be precise distinctions between possibility and actuality (surely the two “interpermeate” at least fleetingly whenever possibilities get actualized);
- that distinctions in general must be precise and impermeable (yes, process thinkers are to be commended for recognizing that things can be distinguishable without being separable, but that is not enough);
- that there must be a unit of becoming that cannot be further subdivided;
- that there can be a univocal account of reality-as-a-whole (Whitehead is ambiguous on this); and

- that there can be no contemporaneous influence from a concrete “other” (even though self-determination and “subjective immediacy” seem to call for this).<sup>20</sup>

I could list other differences, but the six above make my point. This is not by any means to deny or discount the heuristic value of process philosophy’s attempts to get more precise. It does seem that the past (actuality) is largely a settled affair in a way that the future (possibility) cannot be. I thus tend to side with process thinkers as opposed to those who would claim that temporality is ultimately an illusion. But beyond the weak claim that the process view seems to fit my tradition-shaped experience better, I cannot come up with many reasons for the side I have taken. Even if there might be a relatively singular instance in which actuality and possibility are more “interpermeable” than in any other instance I currently know, I would still have to insist that this could not happen to the extent that the distinction dissolved altogether. If anything is an illusion, surely it would be that such a dissolution makes even tensively coherent sense.

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<sup>20</sup>Many of these tenets are related to Whitehead’s and Hartshorne’s doctrine of “epochal” or “atomistic” becoming. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition (New York: Free Press, 1978 [1929]), 61–70; Charles Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1970), 99–130, 173–204. For an instructive critique of this doctrine, see V. C. Chapell, “Whitehead’s Theory of Becoming,” in George L. Kline, ed., *Alfred North Whitehead: Essays on His Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 70–80. Nicholas Rescher relies on “fuzzy logic” to deny, in effect, these atomistic tendencies in his more plausible exposition and defense of process philosophy in *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), 66–67.

In any case, with a more elastic interpretation I do still find process philosophy's most basic principles (as I have come to state them)<sup>21</sup> attractive and fairly plausible:

- “All things are activities or features of activity” (but the distinction between activities and their features is not impermeable).
- “No activity is completely determined by other things” (though what counts as an “other” may not always be precisely determinable).
- “All activities are partly determined by other things” (see above).
- “All activities are partly self-determined” (though distinguishing between the determining self and the determined self may be the most “interpermeable” and problematic of all distinctions).

### **How do these ontological moves compare with European philosophy?**

The influence of such European thinkers as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, with all their indebtedness to Hegel, should be obvious. My ontological moves are intentionally a bit looser, because I believe practical wisdom requires more elasticity.<sup>22</sup> But the indebtedness is there nonetheless. With Ricoeur I would call this a somewhat “truncated” ontology, one that exceeds our grasp even as it illumines our practice. Or I could as easily call this, with Gianni Vattimo, a “weak” or “hermeneutical” or “kenotic” ontology.<sup>23</sup>

These moves also keep me open to voices like that of the later Derrida (whom, admittedly, I “receive” mostly through the

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<sup>21</sup>I am indebted to Schubert M. Ogden for his condensed summation of process metaphysics in his *Faith and Freedom: Toward a Theology of Liberation*, revised, enlarged edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 62–68. Here is his rendition: 1) “to be anything actual at all...is to be...a free response to the free decisions of others already made” (62–63); 2) “nothing whatever...can wholly determine the being of something else” (63); and 3) “whatever is...is in part determined by the being of other things” (66).

<sup>22</sup>Again, for a “tighter” engagement with European thinkers, see Keller and Daniell.

<sup>23</sup>Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

interpretive work of John Caputo<sup>24</sup>). Like Derrida and Caputo, I want to preserve a kind of undecidability in suggesting what these ontological moves may ultimately imply. Undecidability does not preclude faith or making and living with decisions. It simply means that in matters of ultimate import we cannot employ a “decision procedure” or rule of inference to decide the matter for us. In that sense it is a constitutive moment in faith as most Christian thinkers and even the radically orthodox would portray faith. Caputo rightly credits Aristotle as one of the earliest thinkers to commend undecidability in practical wisdom, and Caputo himself sometimes alludes to “postmodern” undecidability as “meta-*phronesis*.”<sup>25</sup> So maybe thinkers such as Caputo and Derrida would not be too quick to call me a logocentrist. I leave that for others to decide.

### **How do these ontological moves compare with radical orthodoxy?**

Radical orthodoxy is one of the most audacious theological movements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It often looks dismissive of practically anybody else, which may remind readers of Karl Barth and his followers. But not everyone acts that way.<sup>26</sup> And unlike Barth, it does not hesitate to make ontological moves within the framework of explicitly Christian theology.

While I am far more appreciative of process philosophy than the radically orthodox tend to be (though I acknowledge that process thought remains something of a “backwater” in philosophical circles), I still see my working ontology as convergent with radical orthodoxy’s. I passingly identify God as the greatest conceivable relatively singular instance of distinguishing and relating relatively

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<sup>24</sup>See, for example, John D. Caputo, *et al.*, eds., *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>25</sup>Caputo, “What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Questioning God*, 297.

<sup>26</sup>See Graham Ward, James K. A. Smith, Conor Cunningham, Gerard Loughlin, *et al.* See my opening comments and references in “Radical Orthodoxy in the Parish.”

singular instances. I am not sure how this differs significantly from Milbank's passing identification of the Trinity: "difference, after first constituting unity...becomes a *response* to unity that is more than unity, which unity itself cannot predict."<sup>27</sup> Or alternately, "the love that subsists between Father and Son is communicated as a further difference that always escapes."<sup>28</sup> Catherine Pickstock develops this into a pithy summation:

God in Himself is relational; God in Himself cannot be without His own image and without a desire even in excess of that image. God is the mystery of signs; God is the mystery of a gift exchanged, and non-identically repeated. That is the mystery of the Trinity. God is not a being, but Being as such. But Being as such is word and gift as well as origin; it is community and not isolated individuality.<sup>29</sup>

For Milbank and Pickstock, then, God is understood as original mutuality, infinitely expressed and diversely shared, "the mystery of a gift exchanged, and non-identically repeated." That certainly says more than my ontological moves seem to presume, but it should, and I see no contradiction involved.

No doubt Milbank and company would suspect my ontology of remaining stuck in an "immanent" cosmology that will slide us right back into nihilism. My view of transcendence, they might say, is simply an extrapolation from immanence. I prefer to say, however, that my view of immanence is simply the ongoing embodiment of transcendence, so I can extrapolate all I want. And in any case it seems to me that the radically orthodox have done as much as

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<sup>27</sup>John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 424.

<sup>28</sup>Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': A Short *Summa* in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions" *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (1991): 233–34.

<sup>29</sup>Catherine Pickstock, "Is Orthodoxy Radical?" This essay originally appeared on the website <http://www.affirmingcatholicism.org.uk>, and is here quoted with the permission of the author.

anybody to muddy up distinctions between transcendence and immanence, or the eternal and the temporal.

For example, the radically orthodox acknowledge that until now Christian faith has never sufficiently valued the way in which creation *participates* in the “infinite interpersonal harmonious order” (an order which, notably, remains an “indeterminacy”).<sup>30</sup> So they are not just reviving the past, they are also renewing it by taking an intermittently glimpsed vision and making it pivotal. Although they give due credit to Plato and early Christianity for developing a participatory vision of the world, they have reworked the vision even further.

Like traditional Platonists, they see what happens in the world as a kind of repetition of a “plenitudinous supra-temporal infinite.”<sup>31</sup> But what happens is not just an illustration, and it is not even supposed to be an exact replica. It is always a “non-identical repetition,” a creative enactment that produces real difference and novelty.<sup>32</sup> The non-identical thus matters just as much as the repetition. And because the “supra-temporal infinite” turns out to be the triune God, we find an original sort of non-identical repetition in play even here.<sup>33</sup>

God as Trinity is therefore...a “community in process,”  
infinitely realized, beyond any conceivable opposition  
between “perfect act” and “perfect potential.” A trinitarian

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<sup>30</sup>See Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–3. This paragraph and the one following are adapted from my earlier article, “Radical Orthodoxy in the Parish,” 226–27.

<sup>31</sup>Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 306.

<sup>32</sup>Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 306. As Milbank defines it, “what we do or make is not prescribed by a preceding idea; on the contrary, we have to discover the content of the infinite through labour, and creative effort.”

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 423–27.

ontology can therefore be a differential ontology surpassing the Aristotelian *actus purus*.<sup>34</sup>

So it looks as though what happens in the world is a temporal non-identical repetition of a “supra-temporal” non-identical repetition.<sup>35</sup>

This sounds remarkably Whiteheadian, though in a different idiom. I doubt that Milbank would welcome such a comparison. This, I suspect, is partly because the radically orthodox would insist that anything helpful Whitehead may have said was already acknowledged in the analogical visions of, say, Augustine or Aquinas.

Thus Conor Cunningham seems to find all he needs to say about creatures’ co-creativity in a passage from Aquinas’s *De Veritate*: “The likeness of a creature existing in the Word in some way produces the creature and moves it as it exists in its own nature, the creature, in a sense, moves itself, and *brings itself into being*.”<sup>36</sup> For Cunningham this means that

the Word, as exemplar of creation, yet also as eternal image of God, effects an *originary repetition* of creation—or of any particular creature. An existent creature does not repeat the exemplar, but is already within an originary repetition, of which it is the intensification.<sup>37</sup>

While there is a sense in which this “pre-existent” originary repetition is “superior” to its temporal intensification,<sup>38</sup> there is also a sense in which the intensification is “better,” though only “better *because* of the first.”<sup>39</sup> Which is “better” or “superior” depends on whether we

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<sup>34</sup>Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 234.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>36</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 4, a. 8; Cunningham’s italics. Cited in Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 191.

<sup>37</sup>Cunningham, 203.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 191.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 202.

are speaking in terms of the transcendent “truth of a thing” (*veritas rei*) or of a being’s “predicational truth” (*veritas praedicationis*).<sup>40</sup>

In a sense, then, anything that happens in creation is already anticipated in the Word’s originary repetition, but that anticipation displays an “open finality” which leaves room for creaturely intensifications.<sup>41</sup>

The finality of the Word, while being in place, is open, and it is open because of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit... opens up the Word, just as it opens up every creature’s essence...The Spirit, as a “second difference” is, in a sense, *the time of eternity*, as it is the *Midrash* of the Word, so to speak. Here we see the form of divine difference, for *creation in its open difference actually occurs within the movement of divine difference*.<sup>42</sup>

As I wrote earlier, however defensible (or not) this reading of Aquinas may be, it certainly serves to muddy the difference between eternal transcendence and temporal immanence. Cunningham acknowledges this in more Thomistic terms: “Our predicational order cannot now be distinguished in an absolute manner from the *veritas rei*.”<sup>43</sup>

Thomistic or not, it is difficult to see how this does not qualify as some form of “panentheism.” And when Cunningham ventures to phrase things more colloquially, he sounds just as trendy as Marcus Borg or Matthew Fox:

God does not give us a ready-made world because... God is “a God for ever inventing the heaven in which he dwells, and whose next move we can never foresee.” It seems to make sense that if Heaven is ever new so too is creation.

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 226, 191.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 222.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 226–27; italics mine.

<sup>43</sup>Cunningham, 227.

Hence the development of new forms which “add” to being...<sup>44</sup>

The main difference is that trendier panentheists tend not to find this kind of God in Aquinas or Augustine, while the radically orthodox just are not interested in whether it could be found in Whitehead.

### **Conclusion: Remaining Radically Confessional**

What, then, could my own ontological moves contribute to this nonconversation, other than adding even more confusion? Not much, perhaps, beyond helping me to approach devotees of a variety of movements with questions pertinent enough to lure them into conversation. But that is about as much as I would care to claim anyway.

When all is said and done, I still believe that the most appropriate and practically wise angle for approaching any ontology remains radically confessional.<sup>45</sup> We find ourselves confessing that we are claimed most radically by a variety of truths and, just as important, confessing that they do not all seem to fit together in a neatly finished system. So we try to make enough practical sense of that unstable mix to get on with our lives. One thing we do not do is get too invested in intricate systems that always seem to promise more than they can finally deliver. If my own ontological moves seem to call for that kind of investment, feel free to shelve them. Maybe they will not seem so consuming later. What we all need to do for now is pay utmost attention to where God’s common life is taking us. Ontological moves can help, but they are no substitute.

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 207.

<sup>45</sup>With the radically orthodox, I would also insist that the proper context for confessing anything is liturgical, “participating in the shape of a fully embodied life—offered, blessed, broken, and delivered to enliven every other life.” See Allen, “Radical Orthodoxy in the Parish,” 228.