

THE SPIRIT AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD: ON GENDERED
LANGUAGE, VIOLENCE, AND THE TRINITY AND
PHILOSOPHY

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I wish to thank Don Schweitzer for organizing the panel discussion of my book *The Lord is the Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Divine Attributes*, out of which these responses to my book have come.¹ I also extend my thanks to Schweitzer, HyeRan Kim-Cragg, and Jeromey Martini for taking the time to engage my book. I am encouraged by their positive response to my work. They have affirmed my basic premise that the Christian tradition does not adequately take pneumatology into account when formulating the doctrine of the divine attributes and they have also well received my proposed revisions to the divine attributes of impassibility, immutability, and omnipotence. At the same time, each reviewer has made important critiques or suggestions regarding my work and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to them again in this journal. In my response below I focus on the issues of using gendered language for God, the relationship of the Spirit and violence, and the adequacy of engaging the doctrine of the Trinity in response to more philosophical approaches to the attributes of God. I conclude by noting areas for future research.

GENDERED LANGUAGE FOR GOD

In her review, Kim-Cragg has rightly noted that I have tended to present “the Spirit as entirely masculine.”² In the time since I have published *The Lord is the Spirit*, I have concluded that this is, likewise, one critique

¹ The panel discussion took place in St. Andrews College at the University of Saskatchewan during a meeting of the Saskatoon Theological Union’s Graduate Studies Seminar.

² Nevertheless, Kim-Cragg has misunderstood my book in two important places. First she seems to suppose that I would affirm a conception of “the world as the body of God” (see my cautions regarding this idea in Andrew K. Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Divine Attributes* [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011], 141-142) and in her understanding that I present divine omnipotence as a “power that never forces” (I affirm that the power of the Spirit is sometimes expressed in a unilateral fashion on pp. 186-7).

I would make of my book. Elizabeth Johnson is surely correct that masculine images of God have inappropriately dominated Christian theology and liturgy, even to the point where such images can serve as oppressive idols.³ God is neither male nor female, but beyond gender. For this reason, and also based off of biblical precedent, both masculine and feminine, and even inanimate images of God (e.g., God as a rock), can serve as suitable images of God. Nevertheless, in my book I use masculine pronouns in reference to both 'God' and the 'Spirit.' Besides following historic practices, as I explain in my book, one of the reasons I did this is that it is sometimes difficult to avoid using pronouns in reference to God and using any English pronouns in reference to God has its difficulties.⁴ Despite the fact that the New Testament Greek word for Spirit (*pneuma*) is neuter, using the English impersonal pronoun 'it' in reference to God is problematic given the personal nature of God. Furthermore, even though the Spirit is presented with the masculine image of the "Paraclete" in John 14 and 16 (i.e., the term is grammatically masculine in Greek), Kim-Cragg correctly notes the difficulty of using exclusively masculine language in reference to the Spirit. At the same time, even though the Hebrew word for Spirit in the Old Testament is feminine (*ruach*), using feminine pronouns for 'God' or the 'Spirit' also poses problems. For example, using feminine pronouns for God would alienate me from many people within one of my primary audiences—namely, conservative evangelical Protestants—an audience which tends to use masculine pronouns in reference to God in both theology and worship. Since I engage evangelical theology explicitly in *The Lord is the Spirit* (pages 54-72), I unfortunately allowed my concern of appealing to a conservative Christian audience to cause me to use theological language that can even come across as oppressive in some contexts.⁵ In retrospect, it would have been a better decision to avoid using personal pronouns as much as possible when referring to God, even choosing to

³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 18.

⁴ Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit*, 3 fn. 5.

⁵ To some extent, I have followed the lead of Clark Pinnock, who, although certainly recognizing the value of utilizing feminine images of the Spirit, chose to use masculine pronouns in reference to the Spirit given his primarily evangelical audience. See Pinnock's *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 15-17 and 251 n. 20.

use cumbersome terms like ‘Godself’ or ‘Spiritself’ when necessary. I have done this in my more recent work.⁶

While I affirm Kim-Cragg’s basic critique, I do challenge her depiction of my book as “completely oblivious to the view of the Spirit as feminine.” Such imagery is not completely absent from my book. For example, in contrast to the vast majority of Christian theologians, on pages 131-133 I present theological implications (for the doctrine of impassibility) of the biblical and feminine image of the Spirit giving birth to Christians as they are “born again.” Furthermore, I scold theologians for neglecting this feminine image of the Spirit because of the dominant historical preference in Western theology for masculine images of the Spirit.

THE SPIRIT AND VIOLENCE

Schweitzer’s response to my book focuses in on my discussion of the Spirit’s relationship to violence, which occurs within the wider context of a chapter regarding divine omnipotence, where I argue that the Spirit acts with a kenotic power of liberating and holy love.⁷ Schweitzer affirms with me that the Spirit’s power is directed towards “the overall aim of redemption and the kingdom of God” and that, therefore (in contrast to the view of Mark Wallace), the Spirit does not have a sinister side.⁸ However, Schweitzer contests my claim that the Spirit works “to renew all things, not destroy them”⁹ and he proposes that “in working to sustain and redeem creation, the Holy Spirit may work to destroy some relationships, institutions and even living things, that are good, for the sake of a greater good.” I agree with Schweitzer that the Spirit may lead one to end a relationship or to work against an institution and that the results of the Spirit’s guidance in these ways can be painful for everyone involved. However, I want to focus in on the issue of the Spirit’s relationship to violence. Although Schweitzer’s proposal is not only about violence, in his proposal the Spirit is, at times, complicit with and active in violence, even “horrifying violence,” in cases that lead to great-

⁶ For example, see Andrew K. Gabriel, *Barth’s Doctrine of Creation: Creation, Nature, Jesus, and the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

⁷ Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit*, 202-203.

⁸ Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit*, 202.

⁹ Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit*, 194.

er creative or redemptive divine purposes. In such cases, Schweitzer adds, the “Spirit cuts into itself” causing pain to the Spirit for a redemptive purpose, analogous to the redemptive death of Christ.

I struggled with the Spirit’s relationship to violent acts as I wrote *The Lord is the Spirit* and I continue to struggle with this issue. In my book my conclusion regarding this issue was somewhat ambiguous. Even though I emphasized that the characteristic work of the Spirit was to act with a holy power of liberating love, I also left the issue of the Spirit and violence unresolved when I wrote that “even if one did concede that the Spirit has a ‘dark side,’ one must also realize that this supposed ‘dark side’ is clearly not characteristic of the overall activity of the power of the Spirit.”¹⁰ This issue becomes even more complicated since, I suppose, one’s understanding of the Spirit’s relationship to violence will to some extent be shaped by one’s approach to pacifism, for if God is active in violent ways, it may support human violence that, some would claim, has the redemptive purpose of serving a greater good.

With respect to the Spirit specifically, we do have to ask the question regarding the extent that the Spirit is actively engaged in or encouraging violence and the extent that the Spirit is only sustaining the person (or animal, etc.) that is engaged in violence. To consider Schweitzer’s example (drawn from Jay McDaniel) of the orca whales killing gray whales, even though the Spirit is *sustaining* the orca whales (in as much as the Spirit sustains all living beings), this does not necessarily mean that the Spirit is causing, inspiring, or leading the killer whales to kill the gray whales. One could argue that animals, like human beings, have free will to ignore the guidance of the Spirit and act in sinful ways (i.e., ways that are contrary to God’s will).¹¹ Following this proposal, the Spirit would be sustaining the orca whale and withdrawing the Spirit’s life-giving presence from the gray whale, but not actively causing or encouraging the violence to the gray whale. However, since the orca whales need to eat in order to continue to live, it does seem that as the Spirit seeks to give life to the orca whales, the Spirit would inspire them to kill gray whales (or to cause violence to something else) in order for

¹⁰ Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit*, 203 (emphasis added).

¹¹ I have argued elsewhere that aspects of creation can run contrary to God’s will. See Andrew K. Gabriel, “Pneumatological Perspectives for a Theology of Nature: The Holy Spirit in Relation to Ecology and Technology,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 15.2 (2007): 199-200.

the orcas to survive. Hence, I am drawn to affirm with Schweitzer that the “Spirit cuts into itself not only to punish wrong or destroy evil, but at times to destroy one good for the sake of a greater good.” I will have to continue to think through the Spirit’s relationship to violence.

Despite my agreement with the heart of Schweitzer’s proposal, I am more skeptical of the value of the metaphor that he uses of the “Spirit cutting into itself.” He is correct in his intuition that the Spirit voluntarily suffers at times—like a mother giving birth to her child, the Spirit voluntarily suffers for redemptions sake as the Spirit draws people and all of creation into the kingdom of God and toward the new creation.¹² Nevertheless, Schweitzer’s metaphor of the “Spirit cutting into itself” is problematic because in teenage culture when a person “cuts into oneself” they are performing a type of self-harm that is usually “bound to inner tensions, frustrations, and depressive feeling[s].”¹³ This cutting can become an addictive behavior that people engage in as they seek to control other unwanted habits or urges or as they seek to use physical pain to escape emotional pain. I am certain that Schweitzer does not want to attribute such connotations of “cutting” to the Holy Spirit given that the Spirit’s suffering is a suffering of love for another.

THE TRINITY AS A RESPONSE TO PHILOSOPHICAL THEISM

Martini raises another important issue when he asks whether my “trinitarian” approach (with its pneumatological emphasis) to the divine attributes can “effectively answer the proposed challenge of ‘philosophical theism.’” Martini is certainly correct to say that the doctrine of the Trinity has itself been “influenced by Greek philosophical categories.” Nevertheless, my desire to engage in trinitarian theology is not shaped so much by a concern for how the doctrine of the Trinity is explicated, but rather by the heart of this doctrine. On this point I follow (in part) George Lindbeck’s proposal regarding the ‘cultural-linguistic’ nature of

¹² Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit*, 133. Cf. Andrew K. Gabriel, “Pentecostals and Divine Impassibility: A Response to Daniel Castelo,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20 (2011): 189-200, available online at: <http://andrewgabriel.files.wordpress.com/2009/08/gabriel-response-to-castelo-jpt-2011.pdf>.

¹³ Béla Buda, “Cutting Out Self-Harm,” *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 28.2 (2007): 106.

doctrine where doctrines function as the rules for speaking in a religion.¹⁴ In his proposal, Lindbeck makes a helpful distinction between doctrines and their terminology, or, to put it another way, between the content and form of a doctrine.¹⁵ The content of the doctrine is the underlying intuition of the doctrine and expresses the 'rule' for Christian thought or speech about God. The terminology or form of the doctrine may vary depending on who or what community is expressing the content of the doctrine. Following on this distinction between the content and the form of doctrine, my response to Martini is that the form of the doctrine of the Trinity is often shaped by Greek philosophical ideas, but not the content of the doctrine itself. Hence, Greek terms like *ousia* (translated as 'substance,' 'essence,' or 'being') and *hypostasis* (translated as 'person' or 'mode of being') are not what is most important to the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, the content of the doctrine, which these terms seek to convey, is what is most important.¹⁶ That is, at the heart of these terms, and therefore at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity, is the belief that Christians worship one God who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This foundational belief is not dependent on Greek philosophical categories, even though the explication of this belief does, at times, depend on such categories.¹⁷ Hence, in response to Martini I conclude that, yes, a trinitarian approach to the doctrine of the divine attributes does help to answer the

¹⁴ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 18. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 99, rightly corrects Lindbeck's "canonical-linguistic" understanding of doctrine, by proposing that God is one of the speakers in the linguistic context, thereby setting the rules of doctrine.

¹⁵ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 92.

¹⁶ This cultural-linguistic or canonical-linguistic approach to doctrine is clearly operative in my theology when I make an observation regarding the consensus of historical Christian theology regarding the divine unity of God while also observing that theologians express the unity of the divine persons in different ways. See Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit*, 106-107.

¹⁷ Some contemporary African and Asian theologians have offered explications of the Trinity that are not dependent on the Greek philosophical terminology that has dominated the doctrine of the Trinity historically in both Western and Eastern theology. See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 307-380.

challenge of “philosophical theism” (a phrase I don’t employ myself, but see p. 32).

FUTURE AREAS FOR RESEARCH

Kim-Cragg, Schweitzer, and Martini have prodded me to avoid gendered language in reference to God, to recognize that the Spirit’s work sometimes involves destruction, and to be cautious in my use of philosophical presuppositions as I engage in trinitarian theology. In closing, I will highlight ways in which these responses to my book have also helpfully pointed toward areas for future research. In addition to Schweitzer leading me to think further about the role of the Spirit in violent acts (as noted above), Martini has encouraged me to think further about how to revise more divine attributes from a pneumatological perspective, even to the point of not just re-assessing the categories of attributes as defined by classical theism, but also by re-determining the categories themselves.¹⁸ Furthermore, while I have drawn on the work of biblical scholars Gordon Fee, Roger Stronstad, Michael Knowles, and Robert Menzies, Martini has rightly challenged me to further integrate the fruit of biblical theology into my own work in systematic theology. Lastly, while I will probably leave it to others to engage in a worthwhile “contextual analysis” of where and how the Spirit is at work (engaging in such contextual theology was certainly beyond the doctrinal aims of my book), in my future publications I do hope to address Kim-Cragg’s desire to see more reflections on the pastoral implications of my conclusions regarding the divine attributes.

¹⁸ I have continued to pursue my project of exploring the divine attributes from a pneumatological perspective in Andrew K. Gabriel, “Pneumatological Insights for the Attributes of the Divine Love,” in *Third Article Theology: A Pneumatological Dogmatics*, edited by Myk Habets (Minneapolis: Fortress Academic, forthcoming).