

Article

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◆ note critique

ASCENSION AND ECCLESIA AND READING THE FATHERS*

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The doctrine of the ascension, often undervalued and often misinterpreted, has not, Farrow argues, been accorded its proper place in the history of Christian thought. *Ascension and Ecclesia*, a broad ranging and stimulating historical and systematic study, will do much to provoke reflection on the subject. The number of writers covered in the book is remarkable — it deals with the biblical texts and a host of writings from the principal periods of church history, both Eastern and Western — and comment after comment about theologian after theologian opens up new perspectives on their thought. Farrow contends that the failure of the Christian tradition fully to appreciate the ascension has had disastrous consequences for its understanding of the church and the eucharist, and, more broadly, for its understanding of creation and God's relation to it, of time and eternity. His central thesis is that the eucharist grounds the church and not, as is often assumed, the church the eucharist. It is only within the context of the eucharist that the church can be correctly thought about, but in turn, the eucharist can only be correctly thought about if the importance of both the presence and the absence of the bodily ascended Jesus is recognized, or, to use a phrase from Calvin that Farrow favours, if it is recognized that Christ is in a certain manner present and in a certain manner absent.

Farrow believes that the church today has more difficulty coming to terms with Christ's humanity than with his divinity : we look past the ascended Christ's humanity and focus on his divinity. The tendency to disregard Christ's humanity leads to the substitution of the church for Jesus, which obscures the church's ambiguous status and leads to triumphalism, institutionalism, individualism, and a host of attendant problems. This tendency is rooted in the dualistic thought of Origen and Augustine,

* A review article of Douglas FARROW, *Ascension and Ecclesia : On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999. This review article is based on a presentation given as part of a book review panel on *Ascension and Ecclesia* at the Canadian Theological Society conference, at the Learned's, Université Laval, 26 May, 2001.

and the book is devoted to tracing a line running from them through the main figures in the history of Christian thought to those in the modern age who, Farrow maintains, came closest to getting it right, namely, Barth and Torrance. The one Christian thinker who stands out as an exception to this dark history is Irenaeus, the one theologian we can take as a sure guide for our thinking about the ascension.

Although the richness of *Ascension and Ecclesia* warrants the discussion of many topics, both methodological and substantive, this article will deal with Farrow's approach to the Patristic materials — in particular, his reading of Origen, Augustine, and Irenaeus — and his understanding of the development of doctrine in the early church. I shall argue that in his attempt to make the writings of these three Fathers fit his theory, Farrow gives a skewed picture of each and underestimates the complexity of the way in which doctrine took shape in the early church. On the one hand, however dualist Origen and Augustine may be, their conception of God as three and of God's relationship with creation is much more dynamic than Farrow allows; and they both have a more positive view of creation generally, and humanity and its bodily nature in particular, than Farrow would have us believe. On the other, however positive a view Irenaeus had of creation, his doctrine of the Trinity is not sufficiently developed to sustain the doctrine of the church Farrow attributes to him, a doctrine of the church, which, in any case, is based on an unexplained modern conception of reality as relational. I shall begin my analysis with where Farrow thinks the tradition went wrong, with Origen and Augustine, and then turn to Irenaeus.

Farrow's characterization of Origen's thought as a whole is shaped by his acceptance of the view of a previous generation of Origen scholars that Origen's thought was largely driven by Platonic/Neoplatonic concerns.¹ Farrow contends that for Origen "diversity and pluriformity *per se* were already signs of a defection from the divine unity which creation ought more perfectly to reflect. Nor would we be wrong to link such a view to deficiencies in his concept of God. The trinitarian thinking we found in Irenaeus recedes rather than advances, unable to compete with a powerful stress on sheer oneness as the proper basis of divine transcendence" (p. 91-92). In the footnote to this statement, Farrow remarks that "This transcendent unity is not the relational unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, though there is such, but is finally the ineffable oneness of the Father alone" (p. 92). Origen's God is a God of apathy. The deepest roots of his conception of God lie not in salvation history, but in the opposition between the one and the many. His worldview was constructed along dualist lines and he associated only the rational with the truly real. The fall is a fall into fleshly existence and evil is connected with the spatio-temporal world. Farrow points out that while for Origen matter is good because it is the gracious provision of God, salvation he sees in part as a matter of leaving behind the grosser things of this material world, including the grosser nature of the body. Thus, the restoration of all things will entail the safe return of "all spirits" to "the realm of pure rational being from their sojourn in a strange land" (p. 93). Origen appears to have thought that Christ did

1. For a recent review of Origen scholarship, see Joseph TRIGG, "Origen and Origenism in the 1990s", *Religious Studies Review*, 22 (1996), p. 301-308.

not ascend in the body ; and he drives a wedge between the human Jesus and the divine Christ. The problem of the presence and the absence, Farrow maintains, “becomes rationalized and internalized, together with the ascension itself. It becomes a question of the cultivation of a spiritual mind, of the fine-tuning of the inner person to the invisible reality, and is no longer bound up with the matter of a man’s departure and return” (p. 100).

On the one hand, Origen’s dualism leads to an ecclesiology deeply rooted in individualism (evidenced by the growth in the number of monastic houses, which were often heavily Origenist),² as the Christian turns inwards in the search for unity with the hidden Logos. This generates in turn a privatisation of the sacraments and sacramental nominalism. On the other, this dualism leads to institutionalism : “The transference of spiritual leadership from the official presbyterate to the enlightened, contrary to Origen’s intention, leaves room for an increasingly pragmatic and politicized view of the former” (p. 103). Farrow concludes that with the ecclesiology of Origen, “we catch a glimpse of what will later manifest itself as the Janus-like character of the Christian church : the alienation from the world which it often encourages among the saints, and the *rapprochement* which it seeks as an institution” (p. 105).³

Farrow’s understanding of Origen’s thought, however, shows little acquaintance with the studies of such recent Origen scholars as Williams, Torjesen, Osborne, Edwards, and Widdicombe. The Origen that emerges from the studies of these scholars is a thinker more guided by Christian revelation than Farrow allows. Oneness is not the starting point for Origen’s conception of God and God’s relation to creation. As I have argued in both the first and the revised editions of my book *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*, “For Origen, the terms for thinking about God were those of the scriptural narrative. It was the God there identified as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the God who acted towards the world in the incarnation of Christ and the sending of the Spirit that had to be accounted for. Salvation lay in the proper apprehension of these things.”⁴ Torjesen, in her ground breaking 1989 study of *De Principiis*, “Hermeneutics and Soteriology in Origen’s *Peri Archôn*,” argues that while *Peri Archôn* is cast in the traditional classical form of a treatise on first principles, it was intended to be a handbook for the reading of Scripture.⁵ The metaphysics of the three Christian principles, laid out mainly in the first book, provide the conceptual framework for the extended discussion of doctrines and their scriptural basis, which are found throughout the work. And Mark Edwards has recently re-

2. A claim that Farrow treats as self-evident.

3. It is notable that Farrow makes little reference directly to Origen on the question of the church and the sacraments, relying instead largely on comments from the secondary literature, which themselves do not discuss the topic directly. Origen had a rather more complex understanding of the process of salvation than Farrow acknowledges, one in which the church played a significant role. Farrow makes no mention, for instance, of the importance for Origen of the church as the context for the interpretation of Scripture, scriptural interpretation being fundamental to how Origen thinks the soul comes to a knowledge of the Son and so to the Father. (On this, see, for instance, Karen TORJESEN, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen’s Exegesis*, Berlin [coll. “Patristische Texte und Studien,” 28], 1986, p. 45 and 122.)

4. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1st ed. 1994 ; quotation from rev. ed. (2000), p. IX-X.

5. In E.A. Livingstone, ed., *Studia Patristica*, Leuven, 1989, p. 333-348.

marked that Origen's theology is "as biblical as any"; God, for Origen, "is present to us only through the historical epiphanies of his Word."⁶ Scripture is the necessary starting point for access to a knowledge of God and the starting point is not superseded.

It is true that for Origen the Son is subordinate to the Father, but Farrow's statement that it is to Origen "more than anyone else that we owe the hegemony of a far too narrow notion of the Father as ἀρχή or αἰτία the Son as λόγος or divine reason; of the Spirit as the source of inner light which liberates one from the pitfalls of material existence," a conception which he thinks had an influence on the Nicenes (p. 92), is far too simple. Origen was the first to argue for the eternal generation of the Son and to attempt to provide a conceptual and linguistic basis to support the idea. Furthermore, his conception of the relation between the Father and the Son was one in which there was real plurality and mutuality — he writes, for instance, of the delight that the Father and the Son eternally take in each other.⁷ As Williams has observed, Origen "hints at a fundamental datum of later Trinitarian thought — that the Father-Son relation is simply part of the *definition* of the word God, and so does not exist for the sake of anything else than itself."⁸ The Nicene Athanasius, drawing on Origen's conception of the relationality of the Father and Son, and arguing for the co-equality of the Son with the Father, was, in effect, to posit that datum. He for the first time in Christian thought contended that the content of the divine relation was love and that it was that that accounts for the act of creation, for the goodness of creation, and for its redemption.⁹ As we shall see, we do not find such a developed sense of the relational nature of the Trinity and its content with Irenaeus.

At the heart of Origen's soteriology lies the notion of God's fatherhood.¹⁰ Salvation lies in the apprehension of divine fatherhood and it is principally through the incarnation that we come to this knowledge. Indeed, to address God as Father in prayer can only be done because of the incarnation. It is as we love the Son, that we progress from knowing God as Lord to knowing him as Father, from the condition of slavery to that of sonship, from a relationship characterized by fear to a relation characterized by love.¹¹ This affective element in Origen's thought, which reaches from his doctrine of God to his understanding of salvation, Farrow ignores in his commitment to the notion that Origen's God in its Neoplatonic shaping is apathetic. Osborne nicely draws out the fundamental difference between Origen's conception of divine transcendence and that of the Neoplatonists: in his conception of divine philanthropia as a love "that stoops to the level of humanity to the extent of assuming sin and death, and that shows no prejudice, respecting the fallen as well as the

6. "Christ or Plato? Origen on Revelation and Anthropology," in Lewis AYRES, Gareth JONES, ed., *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, London and New York, 1998, p. 11-25 (p. 11).

7. In *De Principiis* I.4.4; IV.4.1, and elsewhere. See the discussion in WIDDICOMBE, *The Fatherhood of God*, rev. ed, p. 90-91.

8. *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987, p. 139.

9. WIDDICOMBE, *The Fatherhood of God*, rev. ed, p. 184-187 and 206-209.

10. See the whole of the first half of *ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, p. 93-97.

great,"¹² which is expressed most acutely in the incarnation, Origen departs decidedly from the Neoplatonists, for whom such philanthropia is incompatible with the transcendence and independence of the One (p. 280).¹³

What then of Farrow's view of Origen's attitude to bodily, material existence?¹⁴ On the question of whether the eternal rational souls are clothed in the body when they return to their creator and remain in that condition, Farrow's argument is opaque. On the one hand he seems to allow that the body, suitably altered, will not simply be abandoned in the resurrection, but on the other he is unconvinced by Edwards' argument¹⁵ that Origen believed that we do permanently retain our bodies (p. 95). But whether the body for Origen is permanent or not, Farrow maintains that for Origen it will have been "purged by the soul of everything that pertains to our bodies" (p. 95). He provides no evidence from the Origen texts, however, to support the charge. As Dawson simply observes, for Origen, for the soul to be soul, it requires an appropriate body.¹⁶ In *On Prayer* 31.3, referring to heavenly bodies, Origen remarks that "it would be exceedingly stupid if anyone were to think that, like statues, it is only their outward appearance that has a human form and not their inner reality." And in a passage from Methodius of Olympus, one of Origen's severest early critics, Methodius says that Origen believed that "the marks which are characteristic of the physical quality" of the dead "remain constant; it is because of the preserving of this quality that scars caused in our youth persist in our bodies, and so with other peculiarities, moles and similar marks."¹⁷ The apostle Paul, after all, had reckoned that the body had to be transformed, that flesh and blood could not inherit the kingdom of heaven, and Origen's reading of 1 Corinthians 15 in both *De Principiis* II.10 and *Contra Celsum* V.18 are entirely consistent with this.

It is true, as Farrow points out, that there is a sentence in *On Prayer* 23.2 where Origen says that we are to think of the ascension of Jesus to the Father, "in a manner more befitting his divinity, that is, as an ascension of the mind rather than of the body." The obvious interpretation of this is that Origen did not think that Christ retained his body in the resurrection. It is just possible, however, that he did not mean quite what he appears to mean by mind and body. Edwards explains that when Origen is referring to human beings in their heavenly condition "The saint remains a composite of body, soul, and spirit, but as body and soul are purified, the whole of him

12. "Neoplatonism and the Love of God in Origen," in Robert DALY, ed., *Origeniana Quinta* Leuven (coll. "Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium," 105), 1992, p. 270-283 (p. 278). The word philanthropia is not used by Plotinus at all and Porphyry does not use it of God.

13. OSBORNE, "Neoplatonism and the Love of God in Origen," p. 280.

14. The subject is less than straightforward partly because the textual basis on which it was traditionally said that Origen denied the resurrection of the body is suspect — the texts which seem to point in that direction were generally attributed to Origen by his enemies, something Farrow does not take up. See Mark EDWARDS, "Origen No Gnostic; Or, On the Corporeality of Man," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 43 (1992), p. 23-37.

15. Mark EDWARDS, "Origen's Two Resurrections," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 46 (1995), p. 502-518.

16. "Allegorical Reading and the Embodiment of the Soul in Origen," in Lewis AYRES, Gareth Jones, ed., *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, London and New York, 1998, p. 26-44 (p. 42).

17. Quoted in DAWSON, "Allegorical Reading," p. 42.

can be subsumed in the name of his highest part"¹⁸ and perhaps we are seeing something of that here.

Although at points Farrow seems more favourably inclined to Augustine than to Origen, he concludes that in the end the contribution of Augustine represents a second backwards step. He argues that in such early works as the *Confessions*, in which the Neoplatonic rot which affects all his works is especially evident, the physical and social natures of church are not recognised as they would be later. But this is to paint too black a picture of Augustine's thinking about the church in the earlier work. In the *Confessions*, Augustine portrays the church in a deeply positive way as the ongoing object of the dynamic trinitarian action of God and as reflecting that action within its life. His emphasis in the *Confessions* on the plurality of the church is seen in the intensity with which he argues in Book XII for the necessity of the communal nature of scriptural interpretation ; indeed, in Book XIII for the necessity of communal engagement in the church's governance of itself through the episcopal structure ; and in this latter book, in his celebration of the diversity of gifts within the church. All of this is, as Augustine perceives it, a reflection of the actions of Father, Son, and, especially, the Holy Spirit within the community of believers. There are, as well, numerous passages in the narrative account of the first nine books in which the communal and plural nature of the church is drawn attention to. Following Augustine's conversion, for instance, when Monica and he are caught up in their vision of transcendent wisdom in Book IX, it is notable, in contrast to his solitary Platonist vision of Book VII, that Augustine describes this as communal experience. Similarly, in Book IV, when Victorinus is finally prepared to confess his faith, he insists that be baptized in public in the body of the church and not privately.

In my reading, then, the *Confessions* is consistent with the *De Trinitate*, where it is clear that the unity that the church has both here and in heaven will not be won at the expense of variety. In Book IV.29 of the *De Trinitate*, for example, Augustine explains that the particular work of the Holy Spirit is the giving to the various peoples of the earth their own languages to enable them to sing the praises of the glorified Christ. This concern to affirm the importance of the on-going plurality of the church is seen too in the final words of the *De Trinitate* (Book XV.51). There, Augustine affirms the church's belief in the plurality of the godhead and asks forgiveness for the infelicities of his attempt to explain it, and in particular, for his over-speaking and imprecision. But this is how he ends the work : "So when we attain to you, there will be an end to these many things which we say and do not attain, and you will remain one, yet all in all, and we shall say one thing praising you in unison, even ourselves being also made one in you. O Lord the one God, God the Trinity, whatsoever I have said in these books that is of you, may those that are yours acknowledge ; whatsoever of myself alone, do you and yours forgive. Amen." Augustine, aware of his limitations, places his work and its evaluation in the hands of God and the church. While there will be an end to the many things which we say and do not attain, we shall do it as a "we" and the God who is one is also three and all in all. For Augustine, the

18. "Origen's Two Resurrections," p. 506.

church in its unity is also plural, and in its plurality it is also a unity, just as is God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But for Farrow, the later works, like the early ones, although less Platonic, contain a fundamentally flawed conception of the ascension and, accordingly, of the church. Farrow's attack on Augustine's understanding of the ascension and its ecclesial implications turns on his interpretation of Augustine's use of the "prescriptive maxim, *per Christum hominem ad Christum deum*. This maxim rests on the assumption that the humanity of the Word has no greater purpose than to lead us to his divinity, an assumption equally well-suited to an Origenist agenda as to the Nicene" (p. 119). Farrow concludes that for Augustine the "bodily ascension, though affirmed, is for the first time assigned an essentially negative value or function" and Christ's human nature perceived to be necessary "only 'for our weakness'" (p. 120). In the light of this interpretation of the significance of the maxim for Augustine, Farrow adduces numerous passages from the Augustine *corpus* in support of his argument, many of which at first glance seem to be innocuous enough,¹⁹ and this understanding of the maxim underpins his analysis of Augustine's *totus Christus* doctrine. The ubiquity of Christ's divinity, which the abandonment of his humanity allows, leads to the consequent identification of the earthly church with the heavenly and thus to ecclesiastical institutionalism and triumphalism. But is Farrow's interpretation of the maxim correct? In support of it, Farrow quotes a passage from *Sermon 264*²⁰ in which Augustine says of the disciples that "they would think of him as God [only] when his human nature would be removed from their eyes, so that, with the intimacy which they had formed with his human nature thus severed, they might learn to consider his divinity in the absence of his humanity" (p. 119-120). But the textual evidence is not quite as straightforward as Farrow assumes: there are texts in which Augustine appears to affirm that Christ retains his humanity eternally.

In a suggestive article in *Modern Theology*, Breidenthal argues that Augustine's Christology is a neighbour Christology and fundamental to this is the idea that Christ retains the body.²¹ It is not superceded. However ambiguous his early statements on the subject may be, it is clear from various of his later writings that Augustine plainly believed that Christ ascended with the body. Although it is less clear whether he thought Christ retains it beyond the point of the last judgment, Breidenthal contends that it can be shown that he does. Commenting on *Tractates on the Gospel of John XIX.18*, "The form of the servant will disappear. It presented itself in order that it might execute justice. After passing judgment Jesus proceeds leading with him the body of which he is head, and offers the kingdom to God. Then the form of God will be plainly seen — that form which could not be seen by the wicked, on whose account the form of the servant was displayed," Breidenthal argues that "Augustine

19. P. 120.

20. Dating possibly from as early as 387. See the discussion in *Sermons III/7*, trans. by Edmund HILL, and ed. by John ROTELLE, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, New York, New City Press, 1993, p. 233-234.

21. Thomas BREIDENTHAL, "Jesus is My Neighbor: Arendt, Augustine, and the Politics of Incarnation," *Modern Theology*, 14 (1998), p. 489-503. What follows is largely drawn from Breidenthal. The translation is Breidenthal's.

identifies the divine form of Jesus with this appearance as the ‘head’ or ‘principle’ informing the community of believers. His manifestation as divine Word is at the same time the manifestation of the church as his body.”²² Accordingly, in *Contra sermonem arianorum* 37 (34), Augustine rejects the notion that the body is laid aside. Why should we be surprised that the Son is subjected eternally to the Father, he remarks, “seeing that the human form remains in the Son [forever], and that the Father is always greater than this human form?” When the form of the Son that is Christ’s humanity passes away, and his divinity “is plainly seen,” it is the multitude that he offers to the Father that constitutes his body.²³ Christ judges us not only as the one who as divine judges with authority, but as the one who in retaining his human nature judges as one who is in solidarity with us. Breidenthal observes that the act whereby the divine Word joined himself to our humanity is irrevocable. The human form is not eclipsed by the divine. Rather, it is projected outward, becoming identified with the community of believers who make their appearance as the body of Christ. Augustine means this quite literally : the fellowship of believers is the human flesh and the human soul, the human form, of the divine Word.²⁴

Farrow might well respond that the identification of the human form with the community of believers simply confirms his view that Augustine identifies the church too closely with Christ, thus obscuring the ambiguity of the church’s status. But while it might lend itself to such an interpretation, it points rather in the opposite direction : humanity in its full expression is permanently conjoined with the divine. Creation and its goodness here is recognized and given its due weight ; and, while I have not argued the point in detail, this, it seems to me, is a reflection of Augustine’s general attitude to creation : in its goodness and order it reflects the trinitarian nature of God, a relation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in which love is eternally given and received. The incarnation is not *only* assumed because of our weakness. At the very least what we must say is that Augustine’s thinking about the created order and the body of Christ is more complex than Farrow appears to think.

Farrow’s Irenaeus is a much different theologian than either of the other two Fathers. Sensitive to the nature of the Bible as historical narrative and allowing his thought to be guided by “Jesus-history” — the life and passion and heavenly intercession of Jesus — Irenaeus, Farrow contends, was not prone to allow his thought to be shaped by abstract Hellenistic philosophical speculation and his theology is not fundamentally dualistic. In his anti-Gnosticism, Irenaeus repeatedly affirms the goodness of the created order and the closeness of God’s relation to it. For Irenaeus, in contrast to Origen, the “‘Father of all’ is already in his transcendent simplicity the triune God, who with his two hands — Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit — is well able to embrace the world, and has in fact done so. [...] He is wholly other and genuinely accessible at the same time” (p. 48). This is not a God of apathy. What is more, those who would know this God, “must engage with him, not by some vain

22. *Ibid.*, p. 495-496.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 496.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 497.

effort to ascend to him in their minds, but by obedience to one who in the incarnation has already adapted himself to them. [...] For in the last analysis we can speak of God 'only according to the love we bear him.' Γνωσις is relational, not simply rational. Knowledge of the triune God is by nature personal and communal, which is to say, ecclesial" (p. 48-49). This last point is one that both Origen and Augustine would have been happy to affirm, but, as we shall see below, with this language of "relational" and "personal," Farrow has a specific context of reference in mind.

Irenaeus' affirmation of the goodness of human nature and the human body is grounded in his understanding of the incarnation. Farrow concludes of the doctrine of recapitulation that "in his own undivided person he [Christ] becomes the guarantee of the unity and the goodness of all God's works, and of the continuity between creation and redemption" (p. 53). In "teaching the coherence of all things around the incarnate Word, Irenaeus was safeguarding not only the integrity of Jesus but the integrity of every particular ; that is, he is postulating a creaturely unity which does not exclude the plurality of our human personhood or of our bodily existence" (p. 55). This attitude to the human body, and, indeed, the whole of created reality, is further attested by Irenaeus' celebratory affirmation that in the age to come all will be present with God in the heavenly realm and all will be fruitful.

Irenaeus gave temporal and eternal new meanings. "In the light of the ascension of Jesus, the eternal is something to which the temporal may aspire without abandoning its temporal nature. There is in fact a creaturely form of existence that is fully engaged with God, open to the inexhaustible possibilities generated by communion with God" (p. 50). This engagement is brought about through the descending and ascending of Christ who thereby makes room for the Spirit in fallen creation and room for man in the presence of God ; "he draws the Spirit into man and man into the Spirit." Redemption is a "prising open of creation to the Spirit of God" rather than a "prising apart of creation to liberate what is divine in it" (p. 83). This issues in a church characterized by a sense of its provisionality. "On the one hand, the ascension [...] highlights the discontinuity between the present world and the word to come. On the other hand, ascension in the flesh, as the bishop puts it, demands that we understand the former as something incorporated and perfected by the latter. Continuity and discontinuity are held in tension — the very same that belongs to the eucharist" (p. 46). Aware of this tension, the church is subject neither to triumphalism and institutionalism, nor to legalism. Aware both of the goodness of the world and the need for the world's transformation, the church refuses either to withdraw from the world or to become conformed to it.

Farrow draws out well the richness of Irenaeus' commitment to the bodily ascension of Christ and the implications of this for Irenaeus' conception of the eucharist. But his description of the nature of the life of the church that results from this is less satisfactory. It is dogged both by a failure to define the concepts critical to the discussion and by an anachronistic reading of ideas back onto Irenaeus' ecclesiology. In the opening pages of *Ascension and Ecclesia*, Farrow claims that the church is a "new ontological reality" (p. 6), but, although he uses the word ontological time and again throughout the work, and frequently in his analysis of Irenaeus' ecclesiology, in

which the church is said to be a “community with a highly distinct ontology,” at no point does he explain what he means by the term. He does, however, give us a sense of what is distinctive about this ontology: it is a “relational ontology based on the gift of the Spirit. That which makes man man is not to be found in the soul or intellect, but in a uniquely communal *modus vivendi* [...] in the actual lives of human beings insofar as they live out the possibilities for communion granted to them by the Spirit” (p. 59). Irenaeus develops in various ways “the point that obedience, love, and communion are the most fundamental of ontological categories” (p. 65). What this issues in is a “perichoretic form of existence” which is “based in the perichoretic power of the Spirit” (p. 66).

It is clear that Farrow here is following Zizioulas in the assumption that, as Farrow has it in a quotation from Zizioulas’ *Being and Communion*, “being and relationship must be mutually identified” (p. 60); that “personal relations” are “the most fundamental and constitutive dimensions of creaturely reality” (p. 82-83). This is an assumption that has, of course, been widely adopted by many contemporary writers on the Trinity, among them Moltmann,²⁵ La Cugna,²⁶ and Gunton,²⁷ who attribute the origin of the idea to the trinitarian writings of the Cappadocians. Farrow appears to think that this conception of the nature of reality requires neither explanation nor justification. This way of discussing the nature of being and personhood (and the attribution of it to the Cappadocians), however, has increasingly come under criticism by such scholars as Coakley²⁸ and Harris.²⁹ Farrow shows no awareness of this. But whatever one is to say about the intelligibility of the idea, it is not at all clear that one can say, as Farrow does, on the basis of such statements as that quoted above — “we can speak of God ‘only according to the love we bear him’” — that Irenaeus, “is certainly working towards” this ontology (p. 60). While it is true, as Farrow contends, that Irenaeus does not engage in systematic analyses of the nature of the human being in the terms of late antique philosophy, this does not mean that he has anything like the self-conscious adherence to the Zizioulian metaphysics of personhood that Farrow attributes to him.

Furthermore, Farrow provides no explanation of what he means by the word perichoretic, a word first used in doctrinal reflection in the fourth century of the relation between the human and the divine in Christ and later used in trinitarian reflection, but

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25. Jürgen MOLTSMANN, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, London, SCM Press, 1981.
 26. Catherine LA CUGNA, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, San Francisco, Harper, 1991.
 27. For instance in his recent, Colin GUNTON, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
 28. Sarah COAKLEY, “‘Person’ in the ‘Social’ Doctrine of the Trinity: A Critique of Current Analytic Discussion,” in Stephen DAVIS, ed., Daniel KENDALL, Gerald O’COLLINS, *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium in the Trinity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 123-144.
 29. Harriet HARRIS, “Should We Say that Personhood is Relational,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 51 (1998), p. 214-234.

which has been applied to the human sphere in recent theology.³⁰ It appears that what Farrow means by it, as his comments about the Spirit and man referred to above suggest, is mutual interpenetration; but how and in what way this interpenetration takes place he does not say, beyond citing passages from Irenaeus in which Irenaeus remarks that there is a mutual rejoicing among figures separated in time such as Abraham, Simeon, Mary and the angels. The question of where the body fits into this is not addressed. Farrow, however, can conclude that the “doxological worldview,” traced out along trinitarian lines, which results from Irenaeus’ relational ontology and is grounded in the perichoretic power of the Spirit, is “essentially a eucharistic model of reality” (p. 66).

It is puzzling that the terms used in the description of what we are to take as the high-point in the history of Christian reflection about the nature of the church, a high-point based on what Farrow considers to be the high-point in thinking about the ascension, should have been left so vague, and, to the extent that they are understandable, that it should not be acknowledged that they reflect a particular set of modern assumptions. While it is the case, as Farrow contends, that Irenaeus’ thought is less dualistic than Origen and Augustine, that he is less given to metaphysically oriented doctrinal reflection than they, it is this blank-slate quality that allows Farrow to inscribe his Zizioulian conception of reality back onto Irenaeus.

One of the ironies involved in Farrow’s reading of Irenaeus is that the very theologians on whom he Farrow is drawing for the notion of a relational ontology and perichoretic existence believe that these ideas arose from a much more highly developed doctrine of the Trinity, that of the Cappadocians, than is found in Irenaeus, a doctrine which entailed rather a great deal of metaphysically ordered thought and a doctrine that owed a very great deal to the theologians who wrote before them, Origen prominent among them. For all of his conviction that God was engaged in the world through his two hands and his affirmation that both the Son and the Spirit, distinct from the Father from the beginning of the created economy, were divine and equal to the Father, Irenaeus did not attempt to explain how it was that the two were equal to the Father; nor did he say that the Son was eternally begotten;³¹ nor did he explain how Christ’s divinity was united to his humanity and thus entered into the world in a redemptively effective manner. We see no attempt on the part of Irenaeus to articulate what we find in Origen — the basis for saying that the Father and Son eternally delight in each other, which Athanasius was then to take up and define in

30. For a brief discussion of the history of the term and its usefulness in contemporary writings about the Trinity, see David CUNNINGHAM, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology, Challenges in Contemporary Theology*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 180-181.

31. Irenaeus does not say that God becomes compound in order to deal with the world, a position that Farrow believes would destroy his whole argument, but neither does he provide a basis for saying that God does not do so. Later theologians, such as Origen and Augustine, thought it essential that theology attempt to address the issue. One recent Irenaeus scholar, Dennis MINNS, *Irenaeus*, Washington, Georgetown University Press, 1994, p. 53, argues that Irenaeus “describes the operation of this Trinity in subordinationist terms,” an assessment, which, judged by later standards of orthodoxy, is surely correct. While Farrow acknowledges that questions might be raised about Irenaeus’ treatment of a host of subjects, the Trinity and the incarnation among them, he excuses him on the grounds that he was a pioneer.

terms of love. For Augustine, it was only possible to think of creation and the church as both one and plural because of the eternal and mutual love between the Father and the Son, which is the Holy Spirit. Although many of those who take the Zizioulian line reject Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity, as I have already observed, Irenaeus' "distinctive ontology" is not grounded in as rich a doctrine of the Trinity as most recent theologians think a coherent ecclesiology requires, or, indeed, as Augustine offers.³²

My purpose in this article has not been so much to defend the theologies of Origen and Augustine or to attack that of Irenaeus. Rather, it has been to show that what we have in *Ascension and Ecclesia* is a species of the reading of the history of Christian thought in which, in the interest of pursuing the course of one topic of importance, the significance of the development of other topics, and in particular here the doctrine of the Trinity, has not simply been neglected but, at least by implication, has been regarded as wrong-headed. There is, in Farrow's schema, not only just one figure to have gotten the doctrine of the ascension right, there is also only just one to have gotten his approach to the doing of theology right. Seemingly lurking in the background to *Ascension and Ecclesia* is an (Harnackian) rejection of a role for metaphysics in the formation of doctrine: the hero of our piece is the one who indulged least in such a practice, the one who kept most immediately to the biblical narrative. Whether we are to accept that the metaphysical framework of theologians such as Origen and Augustine had ruinous consequences for the history of the doctrine of the ascension, and whether we are to accept that a metaphysic of relation and perichoresis is a better framework, it is necessary to recognize that the latter also is a *metaphysic*. We must not lose sight of the fact that theology cannot be written in a conceptual vacuum. The theologian's task is to employ those concepts that are most able to reveal the full range and depth of the God made incarnate in Jesus Christ, always aware that underlying those concepts are assumptions often not immediately obvious to her or him. At the very least, such a notion as "personal relations" are "the most fundamental and constitutive dimensions of creaturely reality" needs to have been explained and justified if it was to have been made the touchstone for the interpretation of the Patristic authors critical to the book. Had Farrow done so, he might have been less prone to rely on a one-sided and dated approach to the interpretation especially of Origen, but also of Augustine, and his appreciation of Irenaeus might have been more realistic.

32. It lies beyond the scope of this review to enter into an analysis of Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity. I shall simply observe that Moltmann could not have given such a rich treatment of the nature of relations and love as he does in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* had not Augustine written about the doctrine of the Trinity in the way that he did.