NAZARENE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A "NEW" NEOCLASSICISM: DIVINE SIMPLICITY AS SHALOMING SIMPLICITY AND ITS ECCLESIAL IMPLICATIONS

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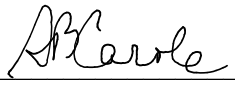
We, the undersigned, determined that this dissertation has met the academic requirements and standards of Nazarene Theological Seminary for the Doctor of Ministry program.



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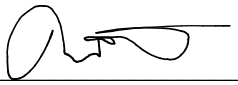

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There's a magnet on my fridge: "Everything great in the world comes from neurotics" – a gift from a departed friend who relished my eccentricities (and there are many, I'm told). While I'll spare you a novel-length ode to those who weathered my neuroses, they're owed far more than these lines can hold.

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For
H. Sherwood Jewett
R. Sherwood Jewett

T. Sherwood Jewett

"What I received, I passed on to you…"

ABSTRACT

J. Sherwood Jewett

A "New" Neoclassicism: Divine Simplicity as Shaloming Simplicity And Its Ecclesial Implications

This project critically engages the classical doctrine of divine simplicity, interrogating its historical development and contemporary theological critiques to propose a "new neoclassicism" rooted in the concept of *shaloming simplicity*. By tracing the legacy of classical theism through Augustine, Aquinas, and modern interlocutors like David Bentley Hart and Paul Hinlicky, the study exposes tensions between divine freedom, determinism, and creaturely agency. It challenges the perceived incompatibility of divine simplicity with a dynamic, relational God, arguing that deterministic frameworks risk collapsing divine and creaturely freedom. In dialogue with process theology's rejection of classical metaphysics, the project synthesizes apophatic and cataphatic theology to reimagine divine simplicity as an expression of God's triune love – a *shaloming* activity oriented toward cosmic reconciliation (*shalom*). Drawing on Brueggemann's vision of *shalom* and Eucharistic theology, the proposal reframes simplicity as God's undivided commitment to healing fractured creation, with ecclesial implications for practices of community, justice, and sacramental participation. Ultimately, the dissertation argues that divine simplicity, reconceived as "love loving," grounds a hermeneutic of *shalom* that bridges theological metaphysics and the church's mission, offering a transformative vision of God's economy for creation.

INTRODUCTION

Gregory of Nyssa's admonition – "Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything"[1] – serves as both warning and warrant for this project. To speak of God is to risk conceptual idolatry, yet theology cannot abandon the task. Divine simplicity, the claim that God is without parts, exemplifies this tension. For centuries, it anchored classical theism's vision of God's unity. Today, critics like R.T. Mullins argue it negates freedom: "All that is needed – to show that divine simplicity is false – is the claim that God is free."[2] But is this tension inherent to the doctrine, or a distortion of its logic?

Thesis: Reclaiming Simplicity as Shalom

This project contends that divine simplicity need not entail determinism. The perceived conflict arises not from the doctrine itself but from interpretations that privilege philosophical abstraction over Scripture's relational God. I propose *Shaloming Simplicity*: a rearticulation of divine unity as dynamic harmony, where God's essence is love (1 Jn. 4:8), and creaturely freedom flourishes as participation in divine *shalom*. This "New Neoclassicism" retains classical theism's metaphysical coherence while recentering it on biblical revelation.

Defining the Terrain

Regarding the grammar of "classical theism," this project employs the term as a shorthand for the coherence of four doctrines central to the apophatic tradition: divine simplicity, immutability, impassibility, and timelessness.[3] The exploration of classical theism begins with a prolegomenon grounded in a methodological commitment to tradition as a living continuum rather than a static artifact. Drawing on David Bentley Hart and Jaroslav Pelikan, this approach prioritizes engagement with modern

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[1] Attributed to Gregory of Nyssa, this exact quote is not a part of his extant works. *The Life of Moses* seems to provide the nearest thing to its source. See Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, ed. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), II.165.

[2] R. T. Mullins, "Simply Impossible: A Case against Divine Simplicity," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7, no. 2 (2013): 199, https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-12341294.

[3] My rationale for using "classical theism" as a delimiting term is explained in Chapter 1.

interlocutors who critically inherit the tradition, thereby framing subsequent chapters' diagnosis of determinist distortions within its historical development.

Chapter 1 traces divine simplicity from its Platonic-Aristotelian roots to its zenith in Aquinas. While Augustine aligned simplicity with Trinitarian plurality, the doctrine's integration into Christian theology often privileged philosophical coherence over biblical particularity. The Reformed tradition's linkage of simplicity to causal determinism exemplifies this tension. By mapping this trajectory, we identify the seeds of modernity's revolt: a tradition at risk of collapsing into traditionalism.

In Chapter 2 we ask: is freedom autonomy or participation? Modern critics often frame it as libertarian self-determination – a view seemingly incompatible with classical theism's "four pillars." This chapter reframes freedom *teleologically*: not as arbitrary choice but as alignment with God's shalom. Divine simplicity, far from negating agency, becomes its condition of possibility. Like a riverbank that guides rather than constrains the current, God's unity directs creation toward its *telos*.

In Chapter 3, contemporary theology fractures into three camps. David Bentley Hart defends classical theism with patristic zeal, dismissing freedom as modernity's sentimental idol. Paul Hinlicky negotiates a *via media*, grounding simplicity in Scripture's narrative *taxis*. Thomas Jay Oord, rejecting tradition outright, posits a God of essential relationality. Each exposes cracks in classical theism – and clarifies the stakes of our proposal.

Chapter 4 is where the project's thesis finally crystallizes: divine simplicity, rooted in the Scriptural claimant, "God is love," is reimagined as the *shaloming* integration of essence and mission. God's unity becomes the harmony of transcendence and immanence, where "adaptive immutability" (changeless in character, responsive in engagement) sustains creaturely freedom. This *New Neoclassicism* avoids process theology's capitulation to contingency while answering determinist critiques.

Chapter 5 delves into the relationship between shaloming simplicity and the life of the church. By exploring teleological freedom's implications for the Church's identity and mission, this chapter invites us to reimagine how justice, revelation, and holiness are expressions of God's love, ultimately positioning the Church as an embodiment of divine reconciliation and a witness to the hope of future unity with God.

Gregory of Nyssa's warning frames this reconceiving of divine simplicity: God's unity, as *Shaloming Simplicity*, is love's dynamic harmony – freeing creation through participation in divine *shalom*. A "New Neoclassicism" emerges, reconciling metaphysics with biblical revelation to dissolve false tensions between God's unity and creaturely freedom.

PROLEGOMENON: A LIVING TRADITION

What will be shown throughout the proceeding project is that the doctrine of divine simplicity enjoys a long and storied pedigree. Sometimes, a long history is a good thing, as it can solidify beliefs and provide a stable heritage that invites every generation to participate in something that is larger than any single person. Yet sometimes, a long history can breed complacency and a moribund lack of impetus for continued growth when the storied past is treated as a static dogma. Here lies the difference between "tradition" and "traditionalism." In his justly famous axiom, Jaroslav Pelikan makes the claim that "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."[4] In the pages that follow, I will offer something that tries to honor the long history of divine simplicity, but in a way that (hopefully) makes sense of some of those things that have seemed, to this reader, to present problems. Granted, many of these so-called "problems" are little more than misconstruals or misunderstandings that tend to occur anytime we are engaging with ancient sources who are far removed from us in time, culture, and language. However, whether they are actual problems or merely perceived problems, a living tradition makes demands upon each generation to faithfully listen those who have gone before, while envisioning those who will come after.

Therefore, this prolegomenon seeks to establish the rationale for this project by listening to two recent articulators of a proper understanding of tradition: Jaroslav Pelikan and David Bentley Hart. Each engages John Henry Newman's 1845 *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* as a way of defining the difference between tradition and traditionalism. Additionally, by utilizing these scholars as interpreters of Newman, rather than directly engaging Newman as a primary source, I am establishing a methodology for the remainder of the project. Since I am primarily concerned with how the doctrine of divine simplicity has been received, most of our efforts will be in listening to the recent inheritors of the traditional doctrine.

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[4] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, The Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

David Bentley Hart: Tradition and Apocalypse

Hart's appraisal of Newman's essay is not unkind to him insofar as he recognizes Newman's acknowledgement of the problem: i.e., Christianity, though claiming authority through tradition, has never clearly reflected upon the theological merit or imperative of the tradition itself.[5] This is seen especially when it is articulated as a question: is there "a particular living, continuous, and internally coherent phenomenon" that we can view historically as the progenitor of our inherited and thus accepted articulation of faith?[6] Where Hart is critical of Newman is in his supposition that he successfully identified and investigated the problem, but never actually provided a solution. Thus, for Hart, Newman's enterprise was doomed by his historicism that looked only at how the Christian tradition had unfolded within discrete socio, temporal, geographical, and economic locales as a "proof" of the immutability of inherited dogmas. Consequently, this forms the heart of Hart's rejoinder insofar as "tradition" is not an immutably static inheritance, but is a living, growing ethos of *becoming.* When this is ignored, what emerges is a tautological problem that Newman cannot avoid: "[What] happened must have happened in *this* way" and precisely *this* way because this is the way it happened.[7] This winks at the determinism that I am proposing underlies Thomistic divine simplicity, especially as understood by some of the doctrine's recent inheritors, by sanctifying a static traditionalism that ignores the developmental process of the tradition itself. When we recognize that what we have inherited as tradition is mediated through generations of thinkers who were themselves products of their various cultures and histories, we will likewise recognize that what we have received is not the "final form" of what the tradition has produced. Rather, it the latest articulation in a long and eternally unfolding revelation that cannot ever produce a true "final form." Thus, the tradition itself gives us the responsibility of contributing to its own eternal apocalypse. In this regard, tradition is eschatological.

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[5] David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 1–3.

[6] Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 2.

[7] Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 6-7.

Jaroslav Pelikan: The Vindication of Tradition

Pelikan addresses a similar concern in his lecture series, especially when he addresses the ethos of the framing of the American Constitution from a Jeffersonian perspective. He maintains that Thomas Jefferson (and Martin Luther in his day) understood the past as though it were a philosophical tradition that provided the "ladder which one climbed to reach the window [of universal truth], but which one no longer needed once the window…was open."[8] Instead, Pelikan suggests a kind of "democracy of the dead" whereby the "living faith of the dead" is made present and accessible through the tradition that has birthed it, so that it may continue to breathe and grow as an ongoing, adaptive story that will continue in perpetuity.[9] Additionally, Pelikan's understanding of tradition/traditionalism gives us stable footing for rightly approaching and appropriating the tradition of Scripture itself. What we often call "the Word of God" might rightly be called "God's words in human words."[10] Even the kerygma of God is mediated through a long and storied tradition that can quickly devolve into little more than a static document of traditionalism. For example, in its most depraved forms, it becomes justification for slavery because "it's in the Bible," or why a woman must cover her head when praying in church. A common aphorism one often hears recited as a truth claim is, "God said it. I believe it. That settles it for me."

This is relevant for our present inquiry into the doctrine of divine simplicity insofar as the doctrine begins as a philosophical category rather than a biblical precept. If one assumes the philosophical tradition at the expense of the biblical tradition, a caricature of God emerges. This caricature will be shown in the following chapters (especially Chapter 2) where determinism seems to be the necessary result of simplicity. Conversely, if Scripture is treated as a static document without meaningfully engaging philosophical and theological history, an equally caricaturized deity emerges. It might even be

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[8]Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, 56.

[9] Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, 61, 65. See also Hart's understanding of tradition as being a "*causal* continuum…the essential unity of a single identifiable 'substance,' with an intrinsic entelechy that allows it to grow and change while remaining solely what it is." Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 10.

[10] A phrase remembered from a lecture given by Dr. Dennis Bratcher.

suggested that this sort of biblicism results in some versions of Marcionism. Regardless of which straw man dominates, the point remains: when we cease to interact meaningfully with tradition, we will invariably find ourselves on the precipice of a fall without the benefit of a ladder underneath us. The tradition that gets us to the "window" of understanding must continue to inform us even as we venture "further up and further in."[11]

Synthesis: A Careful Audacity

Thus, both authors seem to agree that there is no future if there is no past. This is more than a simple acknowledgement of a history that begets our present moment; instead, it is our participation in the traditions that have birthed us so that we may exceed our inherited legacy. That is the desire of every parent, that their child will become more than their upbringing – that they will exceed the expectations (and limitations) of what they have inherited. But to exceed it, they must first know it, live it, breathe it, and in a sense, become it. Tradition, therefore, properly understood is not a series of propositional dogmas that one inherits as a static phenomenon (traditionalism); instead, it is a full account of all that has been received – implicitly and explicitly – as the vehicle to allow the tradition to look beyond itself. Or, as Pelikan aptly describes it, tradition is an icon that mediates what has been said while inviting the observer (active participant) to look beyond it toward that to which it points.[12] In Augustine's words, "beauty so old and so new."[13]

Herein lies the hope of the tradition itself. What had sustained the pre-creedal church and even provided the birthing room for doctrinal univocity (if there is such a thing!) was not merely the remembered or memorialized inherited wisdom; rather, it was the "rapid approach of the Kingdom of

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[11] C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, Harper Trophy edition, vol. 7, The Chronicles of Narnia (Harper Trophy, 1956), 196 ff. In Lewis' redeemed Narnia, there was a continuity from the past into the (unending) future. Knowing the landscape of Narnia *before* its redemption granted access into the land of Narnia on the other side of the door: tradition giving way to revelation!

[12] Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, 54-56.

[13] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), X.27, 201.

God, the Age to Come, and the final advent of Christ as Lord of all things."[14] Said more provocatively: the entelechy of history toward a final and full apocalyptic horizon has always been a living, dynamic, mutable process! Anything less than this is mere traditionalism which becomes nothing more than the *ghosts of dogmas past* with no erstwhile claim upon the lives of our present. Tradition demands that every generation's inheritors stand in a priestly fashion – a bridge – that brings the past forward and the future backward into the right-now with an eye toward the teleological horizon! It might be stated that this also serves as a "new birth into a living hope" (1 Pet. 1:3) that strips us of any anarchial claims. It is far from license to do whatever we want to do; instead, it is a necessary commission to continue the work that has given birth to the faith that we hold so dearly. It is careful audacity.

This careful audacity not only permits genuine inheritors of the historical tradition to look to that eschatological horizon toward which our language always succeeds in falling short (apophaticism), but demands it. Since all language is essentially metaphor and all metaphors fail to fully encapsulate that which they seek to describe, tradition is the necessary task of continuing to explore the unending terminus of theological inquiry into the holy (and wholly) Other. Ultimately, there are no words that are sufficient to speak of *who* God is; however, that should not keep us from always seeking. Salvation history is how we know who we are, from where we've come, and to where we go (epistemology); following in the tradition that history has birthed is participation in community and by continuity (hermeneutics); seeing beyond the immediate landscape of all that has been toward the horizon of what is yet unsaid and unseen is the tenuous place of careful exploration that seeks transcendence (apocalypse/revelation). This is the aim of all theology. But the undiscovered country is fraught with risks: the risk of getting it wrong, to which our future history will offer its corrective(s), the risk of getting it right and alienating those who dare not tread beyond the carefully curated landscape of a dead past, and the risk of falling into the same traps that have caused us to stumble in the past. Tradition risks a lot. But traditionalism sacrifices everything for nothing at all. In the end, I contend that the risk of failure is worth it so long as it ensures

[14] Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 134.

that the tradition is rightly situated within the unfolding narratival revelation of God's eschatological history.

Conclusion

In what follows, we will be exploring the doctrine of divine simplicity through the lens of tradition which necessarily transcends mere historical acknowledgment. By engaging with the thoughts of both Jaroslav Pelikan and David Bentley Hart, we uncover a dynamic interplay between tradition and the evolving nature of faith. This project implicitly emphasizes that tradition is not a stagnant repository of dogma but a living, transformative process that invites each generation to contribute to its ongoing narrative. The interplay of past beliefs with contemporary understanding fosters a richer, more nuanced comprehension of theological concepts, urging us to approach our inherited wisdom with both reverence and critical engagement. As we strive to exceed the limitations of our legacy, we are called not only to honor our past but also to actively participate in the unfolding story of faith, continually seeking the beauty and truth that lies beyond the confines of traditionalism. Thus, tradition serves as both a foundation and a beacon, guiding us toward a future that is informed by the wisdom of those who have come before, yet open to the possibilities of what is yet to be revealed.

I. THE LEGACY OF CLASSICAL THEISM

Introduction

Divine simplicity is the starting point for any coherent beatific vision of the Divine. Or, as Karl Barth stated with eloquent simplicity, "God is."[15] Perhaps he was right in pointing out that this is not a simple aphorism that we can hurriedly acknowledge while on our way to divine revelation. Here, it seems, rests the integrity of all that we can meaningfully and truly say about God. Indeed, God's own self-identification – or more appropriately, self-revelation – rests in this not-so-simply comprehended Scriptural claimant: "I Am who/that I Am."[16] Thus, in my critique of historic Christianity viz. classical theism, I find that the doctrine of divine simplicity, itself, is necessary and must be preserved as the only non-relativistic truth claim of the contingent upon the divine. David Bentley Hart equates denial of divine simplicity with a philosophical atheism, and I am inclined to agree.[17]

In subsequent chapters, I will defend the doctrine as essential to Christian theism; however, I will simultaneously insist that there are serious flaws in the ways in which the doctrine has been applied to the central claims of classical articulations. Therefore, in this chapter, we will first delimit what is meant when this project employs "classical theism" as shorthand for a long and variegated Christian tradition. Second, this will provide the basis for a selective historical survey of the tradition's philosophical roots in Plato (and by implication, the pre-Socratics), to its influence upon Augustine and Western Christianity, and to its dogmatic development in Aquinas. This will bring us to the crux of our critique of the classical system, where recent interpreters have charged classical theism with a determinism that is contrary to our understanding of freedom in both Creator and creature; this will be the focus of the next chapter.

Defining "Classical Theism"

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[15] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1 - IV/4.*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), I/1, 257. Hereafter, Barth's *Church Dogmatics* will be referenced as *CD,* followed by volume, book, and page number.

[16] Ex 3:14: אהיה אשר אהיה.

[17] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 128.

Classifying an entire theological strand as comprehended in a singular term – i.e. classical theism – is always fraught with difficulties and with the danger of oversimplification. A singular term can often lend itself to a caricaturization that ignores the complexities and nuanced differences that obtain within the system as a whole. This marginally acknowledges the difficulties of reducing the dominant Christian tradition (especially in the West) to the nomenclature of "classical theism." This designation, originally employed by early articulators of process theology, was coined as a way of demarcating the differences between the claims of process theology and those of the historic tradition sometimes called "Thomism."[18] However, I have chosen to use this term in spite of the dangers, since its usage has become common (though contested) to comprehending the theological grammar of the historical Western theological tradition. Our usage of it will refer to four specific claims endemic to the historical faith: divine simplicity, divine immutability, divine impassibility, and divine timelessness.[19]

Concomitant to our usage of classical theism will be the apophatic tradition out of which the classical tradition shapes its grammar: thus, "classical theism" is our definitional shorthand for historic Christianity and "apophaticism" is its grammar. Apophatic theology insists that God is so distinct from creation that there is no language or category that can directly speak of what God *is.* Therefore, the *via negativa* of apophaticism functions as a conceptual restriction upon how we speak of God by insisting that God is not comparable to any mode of existence by which we may gain direct knowledge of God's essential being. Already, apophatic grammar is inferred in the classical construct: e.g. divine simplicity where God is non-composite; immutability where God is not subject to change or modification; impassibility where God is not affected by external influences; timelessness where God exists beyond finite conceptions of temporality. A strictly apophatic grammar denudes us of any way of speaking about

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[18] Ronald H. Nash, ed., *Process Theology*, A Mott Media Book (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1987), 3–29.

[19] Nash, *Process Theology*, 8ff. In the introductory chapter, Nash suggests eight attributes that he identifies with "Thomistic theism": pure actuality, immutability, impassibility, timelessness, simplicity, necessity, omniscience, omnipotence. I am following a schema that comprehends these eight in their most reducible form where *pure actuality* and *necessity* are comprehended by *divine simplicity*; thus, I place divine simplicity as the logically prior dogma to all that remains.

God where God can be conceived as "just another being among beings, [or is] within our intellectual grasp."[20] Later, I will suggest that Scripture cataphatically ascribes *positive* attributes to God but that the apophatic tradition necessarily tempers what cataphasis can and cannot positively articulate. While these terms – classical theism and apophaticism – will be further developed throughout the remainder this project, these rudimentary articulations form the basis for what follows.

Historical Survey: Not so Simple

The doctrine of divine simplicity resists easy definition, as evidenced by the diverse scholarly and not-so-scholarly interpretations that abound. Despite this complexity, nearly all explanations share a common foundation: their roots in the apophatic tradition. Historically, this has served as the cornerstone of the dominant theistic traditions, both Christian (*via negativa*) and non-Christian (such as Islam's *lahoot salbi* or Hinduism's *neti, neti*).[21] This illustrates how divine simplicity did not emerge out of distinctly Christian concepts of the divine but as a form of natural revelation through pre-Christian philosophical constructs. These ideas significantly influenced subsequent Christian thought. Thus, by examining simplicity first as a philosophical precept, we can better grasp its application within the classical tradition, particularly concerning the revelatory nature of the Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions. The Church Fathers, well-versed in philosophical pursuits of truth, embraced a view of simplicity that was both philosophically grounded and scripturally rooted. To explore the evolution of this doctrine, we will examine key classical iterations: philosophical simplicity, Augustinian simplicity, and Thomistic simplicity.[22]

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[20] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 142.

[21] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 142.

[22] This is not intended to be an exhaustive historical overview; only key iterations that serve the intent of this project. For a fuller historicity of divine simplicity see Gavin Ortlund, "Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective: Resourcing a Contemporary Discussion," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 4 (October 2014): 436–453.

Philosophical Simplicity

The Pro-Nicene doctrine of divine simplicity did not emerge from a vacuum. Pui Him Ip has shown that its conceptual genesis can be traced to the pre-Christian work of Plato.[23] He offers compelling evidence of simplicity in Plato's *Republic*, discursively mediated through Socrates' voice, as well as in *Phaedo*. According to Ip, Plato's thoughts in each work aim at two interrelated trajectories: God as single in form and non-compositional in being, articulating an early apophaticism where the "simple" God is seen as permanent perfection and ethically pure.

First, Ip highlights *Republic* 380d, contrasting a "simple" God with a sorcerer "able to appear in different forms…sometimes deceiving us." Thus, the simple God is "single in form…least likely to step out of his own form," immutable, and ethically pure, incapable of being anything other than who he is.[24] In *Phaedo*, Plato further develops the concept of simplicity with a focus on God as permanent perfection. In his exploration of the dissolubility (or indissolubility) of the soul and what it means to be a "composite" being, Plato argues that if a being is "complex," each component must necessarily precede the whole. If a creature is composed of parts that preceded the sum of those parts, then those parts can be differentiated from the whole, thereby eventuating in decomposition; thus, all complex entities are finite. Conversely, he reasons, non-composite entities are not subject to decomposition. This is then applied to Plato's simple God, who is "immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and always the same as itself."[25]

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[23] Pui Him Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity before Nicaea* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

[24] Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity*, 15-19. To the last point of "ethical purity," Ip says that for Socrates, there might exist an unrealized possibility for God to "change form" but that God's own commitment to his essential being prevents any alteration. See especially p. 17, "it is impossible for God to be changed, but it remains possible that God could change himself." Further, Ip's footnote to this adds something crucial: "This point has ramifications for contemporary debates about the incompatibility between divine simplicity and divine freedom."

[25] Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity*, 20. Quoting from *Phaedo* 80b.

The aim here is not to exegete or defend Plato's conclusions but to show that questions about divine simplicity are neither modern inventions nor exclusively Christian formulations. As Ip demonstrates, dogmatic simplicity arose from the ethos of Greek philosophy, providing a foundation for later formulations. Concepts like singleness in form, unchangeability, non-compositional nature, eternality, and inherent equality were present around 400 years before Christ.[26]

Augustinian Simplicity

Building on this philosophical foundation, we move into its development within the theological grammar of the Pro-Nicene context, engaging directly with the Augustinian corpus. Augustine's influence on the Western Church is profound and far-reaching;[27] consequently, his concept of divine simplicity, particularly its impact on his predestinarian doctrine, offers valuable insights into current debates about how simplicity relates to divine and human freedom.

In Jaroslav Pelikan's *History of the Development of Doctrine*, he makes two assessments of Augustine's theological evolution that prove helpful in understanding his formulations concerning simplicity.[28] First, is Augustine's philosophical grounding in Neoplatonism, especially as articulated by Plotinus. In a startlingly brash quote by German theologian, Otto Scheel, Pelikan suggests an *a priori* reality to Augustine's own theological underpinnings: "[His] doctrine of grace is merely a consequence of his Neoplatonism and of the concept of God that emerged from this, in which the idea of absolute

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[26] Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity*, 22. Ip delineates between "Basic Simplicity" and "Non-Compositional" Simplicity. My point, though, is not to fully explore these differences; instead, it is to demonstrate a pre-Christian proto-simplicity. Notably absent in this treatment is the Aristotelian categories. However, Aristotle's writings were lost in the West for many centuries but preserved in the East, most notably in Avicenna and Plotinus. Therefore, Aristotelian influences mediated through Neoplatonism will anachronistically be inferred in the subsequent surveys of both Augustine and Aquinas.

[27] For example, David Bentley Hart's concise appraisal: "For, whatever else may be true about Augustine, it is certainly the case that the profoundest differences between Eastern and Western tradition are to a very great degree the result…of the uniquely pervasive influence of Augustine's theology in the Latin West." David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 139.

[28] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition: 100-600*, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 292–307.

causality and omnipotence is raised to a position of greater importance than the Father's love."[29] Regardless of how Scheel (or Augustine) comprehend what the "Father's love" is – a concept that will be explored in Chapter 4 – it is Augustine's concept of God as *absolute cause*, in keeping with a Platonic ideal of simplicity, that would begin to shape his understanding of divine predestination. How this affects the human will and human freedom would become a real point of contention, especially in the Pelagian controversy; however, it is Augustine's commitment to the Platonic ideal of simplicity that undergirds a predestinarian conclusion that would continue to influence later developments.[30] For example:

> But why [faith as a gift of God] is not given to all ought not to disturb the believer, who believes that from one all have gone into a condemnation, which undoubtedly is most righteous; so that even if none were delivered therefrom, there would be no just cause for finding fault with God… But why He delivers one rather than another,—"His judgments are unsearchable, and His ways past finding out." For it is better in this case for us to hear or to say, "O man, who art thou that repliest against God?" than to dare to speak as if we could know what He has chosen to be kept secret.[31]

Or again, when speaking odiously of the eternal fate of unbaptized infants, "It may therefore be correctly affirmed, that such infants as quit the body without being baptized will be involved in the mildest condemnation of all. That person, therefore, greatly deceives both himself and others, who teaches that they will not be involved in condemnation."[32]

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[29] Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 295.

[30] At this point, there is a real concern that beginning a survey of Augustinian thought with some of its more radical claims predisposes us to understand human freedom in light of the controversaries, thereby radicalizing claims about human freedom that ignore the subtlety of the variety of ways in which "freedom" is defined. Stated simply, we do not want to anachronistically overread something in Augustine that misses his point. My thanks to Jonathon Platter for pointing this out. However, as I am primarily concerned with the inherited tradition more than a pristine Augustinianism, especially how it *has* been overread in some of our theological grammar, I will hazard the concern.

[31] Augustine, "A Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints," in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. 5, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 506.

[32] Augustine, "A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants," in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. 5, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 22–23. To this, I cannot help but comment on the idea of the "mildest condemnation" as if that is a satisfactory balm. Hart, never one to mince words, responds less charitably, "…how many Christians down the centuries have had to reconcile their consciences to the repellant notion that all humans are at conception already guilty of a transgression that condemns them, justly, to eternal separation from God and eternal suffering, and that, in this doctrine's extreme form, every newborn infant belongs to a *massa damnata*…no one should need to be told that this is a wicked claim."

Additionally, for Augustine, the divine essence of the simple God was "usually defined in relation to absoluteness and impassibility rather than on the basis of the active involvement of God in creation and redemption."[33] This implies that Augustine's approach to Scripture was shaped by Greek philosophical ideals, interpreting it through the philosophical lens he inherited. While we should not oversimplify or dismiss Augustine's extensive pastoral and scholarly contributions, this illustrates how our doctrinal formulations are intricately connected to their historical contexts and cultural influences. Given Augustine's influence upon Western Christianity, this seems like a necessary consideration.

Regardless of the ground from which Augustine's concepts of simplicity emerged, his conclusions have undeniably shaped much of the theological language that is inhered within the classical framework. While his theological concepts were not the only ones giving shape to classical theism, his extensive works provide valuable insights into the broader theological discourse as well as the dogmatics around which Christian formulations would be codified. Therefore, considering classical theism's commitments to simplicity, Augustine proves seminal to our understanding. As such, it is his most famous statement in defense of simplicity that will shape the remainder of this section: "God *is* what God *has*" or directly from *The City of God*, "Our reason for calling [the Godhead] simple is because it is what it has [hoc est quod habet] – with the exception of the real relations in which the Persons stand to each other."[34] This "simple" statement has been repackaged and repeated through generations as the de facto articulation of strong simplicity: all that is *in* God *is* God.

David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 75. I might add as an ordained elder in The Church of the Nazarene that our own Articles of Faith tend toward this Augustinian bent. See Church of the Nazarene, *Manual 2023* (Kansas City: The Foundry Publishing, 2023), II.5.1-5.2, and especially 5.2: "We believe that original sin differs from actual sin in that it constitutes an inherited propensity to actual sin for which no one is accountable *until its divinely provided remedy is neglected or rejected*" (italics added). This statement implies an original "damning" guilt that is "graciously" intenerated in the successive Article where a subjective "age of responsibility" is venerated. My point is to show that Augustinian concepts of moral freedom have inhered – though mitigated – in a wide spectrum of theological frameworks.

[33] Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 296.

[34] Augustine, *The City of God*, (New York: Image Books, 1958), 217.

This statement is fundamentally a philosophical development rooted in the language of negation, or apophaticism. Revisiting Pelikan's assessment of Augustine's theological commitments reveals how apophaticism became the dominant framework for discussing the divine. Augustine's commitments to absolute causality, omnipotence, and impassibility are inherently part of the divine essence, meaning nothing within God is accidental; rather, what God possesses as a "quality" is indistinguishable from God's essence, *Idipsum* – being itself. [35] However, a linguistic challenge arises when composite beings attempt to describe a God who is wholly other. Any explanation highlights the vast gap between the contingent and the prima causa. Consequently, it became essential to speak of God in terms of negation: what God is not. God is not finite (infinite/timeless), not mutable (immutable/unchanging), and not affected by external stimuli (impassible).

In this apophatic framework, divine simplicity became central to early doctrinal formulations and influenced nearly all subsequent iterations mutatis mutandis. Certainly, Augustine was not alone in his adopting an apophatic terminology and hermeneutic; yet his particular voice – pastoral and poetic – makes this *via negativa* something more practical to the life of faith. For example, in his lectures on the Gospel of St. John, we hear apophaticism expressed with poetic eloquence:

> For in what words, even were it so that I comprehend something, can I convey to your hearts what I comprehend? What voice is adequate? what eloquence sufficient? what powers of intelligence? what faculty of utterance?... Or is it so, since I have ventured to speak and you have seemed to understand, that you have indeed comprehended somewhat of a subject so unspeakable? If then thou comprehendest not, faith sets thee free.[36]

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[35] Augustine's understanding of *Idipsum* (self-sameness) is as the divine name, such that, God is not known by qualia or participation in being: that is, God does not derive *being* from a force or affect outside of God. Instead, God is *being* itself; therefore, only God fully comprehends God. For a helpful treatment, see Jonathan M. Platter, *Divine Simplicity and the Triune Identity: A Critical Dialogue with the Theological Metaphysics of Robert W. Jenson*, Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 195 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 46–48.

[36] Augustine, "Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John," in *St. Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, vol. 7, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), XXXVIII.10, 220–221.

Here, then, is the distilled truism of apophatic articulations of God: If I comprehend that which I seek, it is not God. While I will later critique the ways in which apophatic language can reduce the cataphatic claims of Scripture, I must first acknowledge that apophaticism is a necessary starting point. To this point, Hart offers a tempering rejoinder, "'Cataphatic' theology must always be chastened and corrected by 'apophatic' theology."[37]

Much more should be said about Augustine's unparalleled influence on church doctrine and dogmatic articulation. However, we will focus on these key insights: First, Augustine's articulations of divine simplicity are rooted in Neoplatonism, which emphasized understanding God as the absolute cause, prioritizing attributes like omnipotence, absoluteness, impassibility, and immutability. This is beautifully expressed in the Tractate:

> [For] anything…if it is changeable, does not truly exist; for there is no true existence wherever non-existence has also a place. For whatever can be changed, so far as changed, it is not that which was: if it is no longer what it was, a kind of death has therein taken place; something that was there has been eliminated, and exists no more.[38]

This leads to the second insight from the Augustinian school: apophatic language is the essential non-articulation of the composite creature toward God, what Hart describes as "fruitful negation."[39]

Thomistic Simplicity

Our survey (if it qualifies as such) of divine simplicity's doctrinal heritage has highlighted key developments that are crucial to this current project. The full scope of the development of dogmatic simplicity is too large for any single volume, author, or (even) theory. However, my concern has not been to understand all its various articulations exhaustively, but to see it as the crucial doctrine that underlies our understanding of classical theism. To that end, much time and space must be given to Thomas Aquinas, who becomes the primary articulator of what we usually term classical theism as well as the

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[37] Hart, *Experience of God,* 142.

[38] Augustine, "Tractates on John," 220.

[39] Hart, *Experience of God*, 142.

classical apex of simplicity as a baptized doctrine. However, Aquinas' intricate formulations of divine simplicity have sparked extensive scholarly debate, to which we now turn.

Scholarship is flush with Thomistic interpreters, redactors, experts, and defenders; I am none of these. Therefore, rather than adding my own exegesis of Aquinas' work, I am focused on how Thomism is articulated, particularly in contemporary studies. While Aquinas' writings are central to this brief treatment, I emphasize his modern interpreters to explore the reception of classical theism in relation to divine simplicity, even when interpretations diverge from Aquinas' nuanced explorations. To this end, I have selected a representative sampling of Thomistic interpreters, including both defenders and contenders of Thomistic simplicity. For our purposes, Eleonore Stump (defender) and R.T. Mullins (contender) will serve as key voices in this discussion.

Eleonore Stump's Metaphysical Defense

In a recent publication, Eleonore Stump briefly restated what she defended in her 2003 tome on Aquinas: namely, that Aquinas understood divine simplicity as a metaphysical metaethic where being and goodness are inherent in God as transcendentals that are "the same in reference (*idem secundum rem*), but differ only in sense (*differunt secundum rationem tantum*)."[40] This, she argues, forms the basis for Aquinas' view of God as *ipsum esse*—being itself.[41] Therefore, she presents three Thomistic claims for divine simplicity which will be compared below with Mullins' appraisal of Thomism. First, God's simplicity requires that God is not a physical entity, as there can be no composite, spatiotemporal parts in God. Second, since God is non-compositional, everything in God *in se* is essential, meaning God cannot have any accidental properties. Such properties would imply potentiality, which cannot exist in God according to Thomistic definitions, as the presence of potentiality would indicate that something is lacking. Nothing is or can be lacking in God as a potential; therefore, God is pure actuality (*actus purus*).

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[40] Eleonore Stump, "Aquinas on Being, Goodness, And Divine Simplicity," *New Blackfriars* 104, no. 1114 (November 2023): 781. Quoting from *Summa Theologica* Ia.5.1.

[41] Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 96-97.

Third, "whatever can be intrinsically attributed to God must in reality just be the unity that is his essence."[42] Her emphasis on "intrinsically attributed to God" is crucial, as it allows metaphysical space for seemingly accidental properties attributed to God. This is not merely a restatement of Augustine's axiom – *what is in God is God* – but a carefully crafted metaphysical claim that seeks to clarify Aquinas' complex distinctions between intrinsic and accidental properties.[43]

Confusion among Thomistic interpreters and critics often arises from the "logical" conclusions seemingly demanded by Aquinas' concept of divine simplicity, especially when considered alongside other Thomistic claims. In this work, I focus on the apparent conclusion of absolute determinism that Thomistic simplicity seems to imply *prima facie*: since God is simple and cannot, as *actus purus*, have any accidental properties, then what God does, God must do. There is an important subtlety in Stump's Thomistic apologetic that contributes to this confusion. In a 1985 article coauthored with Norman Kretzmann, they acknowledge that the Thomistic doctrine is both "notoriously difficult" and yet "offers advantages for *constructive rational theology*."[44] This is crucial because Stump later emphasizes prioritizing Aquinas' metaphysical understanding over recent analytical interpretations.[45] She argues that Aquinas' metaphysics should be given precedence, to the near exclusion of analytic processes, though she also claims that his metaphysics provide a foundation for "constructive theology."[46] I note this apparent incongruity as a proleptic to concerns that will be raised within the analytic tradition, where analytic philosophers deconstruct Thomistic simplicity as incoherent. This paradox highlights a potential issue: a

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[42] Stump, *Aquinas*, 97.

[43] These three criteria will be repeated mutatis mutandis in Mullins' work with a fourth claimant.

[44] Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 2, no. 4 (1985): 353–354, italics added.

[45] Stump, "Aquinas on Being," 794.

[46] For clarification, see William J. Abraham, *Analytic Theology: A Bibliography* (Dallas: Highland Loch Press, 2012), 54–69. "Analytic theology…is systematic theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy. It is the articulation of the central themes of Christian teaching illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy," 54.

purely analytical reading of Aquinas might impose logical claims that his metaphysical approach never intended. Yet, the assertion that his metaphysics support a constructive rational theology raises the unresolved question of when it is appropriate to interpret Aquinas' metaphysics as a logical formulation of theological grammar.

Regarding the apparent incompatibility of divine simplicity with God's free choice, Stump acknowledges that this issue in Aquinas is the "hardest to resolve… For all I have said so far, the doctrine of simplicity still seems to entail that the only things God can do are the things he does in fact."[47] She addresses the problem by noting that if God can only do what God does – as simplicity demands – then neither God nor humanity is truly free. Conversely, if God exhibits freedom by choosing one act (or potentiality) over another, then God is not simple.[48] This contradiction cannot be easily resolved by merely distinguishing the modal perspective of the divine from that of the contingent. Such an approach might suggest that extrinsic accidental properties – i.e., that which obtains – imply intrinsic potentialities in God that do not obtain; thus, potentiality is inhered in God's essential being, thereby compromising simplicity. Alternatively, it could suggest that God's freedom is merely epiphenomenal, where God appears to make free choices (e.g., creating this world instead of another) but is not truly free to choose, since God is *actus purus*. Yet, she argues, Aquinas vigorously defended God's *liberum arbitrium* as the divine "power for choosing among alternative possibilities."[49] Hence the dilemma: "If God can do other than he does, then it is possible for God to exist as God and yet will differently from the way he actually does will," thereby implying a contingent accident in God, contrary to Aquinas' claims about accidental properties in God.[50]

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[47] Stump, *Aquinas*, 100.

[48] Stump, *Aquinas*, 100.

[49] Stump, *Aquinas*, 101.

[50] Stump, *Aquinas*, 111.

Stump's conciliation of these apparent incompatibilities is endemic to her metaphysical defense that insists that we are anachronistically impugning Aquinas with modern analytical categories for "accidents." Instead, he understands accidents as "something that has being but in an incomplete sort of way."[51] Here again rests the metaphysical ontology that delineates Aquinas from analytic philosophy. Quoting at length from *De ente et essentia* 6.34-35:

> But [accidents] have an incomplete definition, because they cannot be defined unless a subject is put in their definition. And the reason for this is that they do not have being *per se*, devoid of a subject. Instead, as substantial being results from form and matter when they come together in composition, so accidental being results from a subject and an accident when an accident comes to a subject…And so from an accident and a subject is not produced something that is one *per se* but only [something that is] one *per accidens.*"[52]

According to Aquinas vis-à-vis Stump, every accidental property of God requires a subject. God's singular act of will willing itself effulges from a single intrinsic property of God *in se* (i.e., goodness), but is modally received in various "subjects" as accidental properties. Stump allows Aquinas to make his own case at this point: "[Every] accident is dependent on something else. But there can be nothing of this sort in God, because anything that depends on something else must be caused, but God is the first cause [and] in no way caused [himself]."[53] Therefore, God is both cause and subject within Godself and remains the same across all possible worlds. However, God's *being* – expressed as essential goodness – and the contingent experience of that goodness vary across possible worlds, depending on how it is received by the subject. God freely wills in a single divine act, giving of God's essential self across all possible worlds. Yet, the reception of this free, gratuitous act of will varies with each recipient (subject).[54] For Thomists, this distinction is consistently made between essence and existence, where contingency is understood as a composition of essence (*what* it is) instantiated in existence (*that* it is).

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[51] Stump, *Aquinas,* 111.

[52] Stump, *Aquinas*, 112.

[53] Stump, "Aquinas on Being," 790-91, quoting from *Quaestiones Disputata de Anima*, q.7 a.4.

[54] This is commonly expressed with the metaphor of "white" light that is refracted through a prism. Though the light (i.e. God) is a unitive whole expressed in a single effulgence, when it passes through the prism (i.e. creation), it is experienced in a multiplicity of accidental properties.

Thus, if God is *ipsum esse subsistens* – being itself subsisting – and therefore non-compositional (implying atemporality, as God cannot de-compose), God can freely emanate God's essential being in a single eternal act that is univocally given but discretely experienced. An illustration: The sun's effulgence upon the earth is experienced differently: for darkness (privation), it is illumination; for solar panels, it is heat; for plants, it is photosynthetic energy.

Stump is not shy in her appreciation of the complexity of Aquinas' thought; neither is she reticent to admit to the difficulty in comprehending it. While she does indeed defend Thomistic simplicity as a datum, she is not ambivalent of the critics. Her summary reply to them distills to a categorical error between the apparent incoherence of the "logic" in Aquinas' metaphysics. Her intent is not to answer the objectors with Thomistic prooftexts; rather, it is to reframe our understanding of Aquinas to understand that he was answering ontological questions that analytic philosophers decipher as incoherent. While much more can (and should) be said, in our subsequent survey of some of the key objectors, Stump's own metaphysical retrieval of Aquinas will be brought into the conversation.

R.T. Mullins' Analytic Offense

Thomistic interpreters have gone to great lengths to defend Aquinas' own rigorous defense of simplicity. However, anyone who takes Aquinas' postulates as a datum for classical theism must address the seeming contradictions that simplicity impugns upon the divine, namely, a lack of real freedom in God. These complaints are not foreign to Aquinas himself as he attempts to respond to the objections that simplicity raises in a series of proleptic questions he anticipates in response to his line of reasoning.[55] Yet, to the analytic philosopher, Aquinas' nuanced answers do not satisfy the seeming illogic of his position.

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[55] E.g.: "Some laid it down that God acts from a necessity of nature in such way that as from the action of natural things nothing else can happen beyond what actually takes place…so from the divine operation there could not result other things, nor another order of things, than that which now is." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler, Philip W. Goetz, and Daniel J. Sullivan, trans. Laurence Shapcote Fr., Second Edition, vol. I, Great Books of the Western World 17 (Chicago: Robert P. Gwinn; Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1990), q.25 a.5, 148.

Stump has attempted to defang these indictments of incongruity by acknowledging that there is indeed something real at stake: "Aquinas, I think, would have supposed that this line of thought confuses a logical distinction *to which we have every right* with a metaphysical distinction for which there is no basis."[56] Conversely, R.T. Mullins offers a quick and decisive reply: "If we allow for God to have an accidental property we have…abandoned the basic claims of divine simplicity as well as undermined timelessness and immutability."[57] I would add to this, commensurate with this project, that this would necessarily include divine freedom.

Mullins begins by outlining a standard account of divine simplicity that broadly reflects classical Thomism using concise, propositional formulations typical of his analytic bent.[58] First, he asserts that 1) "God cannot have any spatial or temporal parts" (cf. Stump, claim 1), implying that God is non-material and outside of time as we conceptualize it.[59] He continues, 2) "God cannot have any intrinsic accidental properties" (cf. Stump, claim 2), therefore, 3) there "cannot be any real distinction between one essential property and another in God's nature" vis-à-vis *ipsum esse subsistens*. Here, Mullins differentiates between "real" and "conceptual" distinctions within Thomism, noting that the Thomist argues that God's accidental properties are conceptually received in the subject, where essence and existence are unified but remain essentially the same in God as a single act of will. [60] Consequently, 4) "There cannot be real distinction between essence and existence in God" (cf. Stump, claim 3). This helps explain the Thomistic

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[56] Stump, "Aquinas on Being," 792. Italics added.

[57] R. T. Mullins, "Simply Impossible: A Case against Divine Simplicity," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7, no. 2 (2013): 187.

[58] Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 184.

[59] See Stump, *Aquinas*, 131-158: "God's Eternality." There is a distinction between "temporality" as understood in the Middle Ages and in modernity. For the Thomist, atemporality/timelessness are broadly understood to mean that there is no "before" or "after" in God, no succession of moments. See Stump's fascinating conversation with Robert Lawrence Kuhn: https://closertotruth.com/video/stuel-006/.

[60] Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 184. His fun example is the "conceptual" difference between Clark Kent and Superman. They are essentially the same person but are conceptually different.

axiom of *ipsum esse subsistens*, suggesting Aquinas' view of God as *actus purus*, meaning God has no potentiality inherent in God's being. Aquinas states, "Just as active power is something acting, so is its essence something being. Now God's power is His essence…Therefore His action is His being. But His being is His substance. Therefore, God's action is His substance."[61] According to Mullins, this classical Thomistic articulation of simplicity underlies his critique and ultimate rejection of divine simplicity.[62] Although he denies simplicity, particularly in its Thomistic form, his article is not a systematic rebuttal of the doctrine. Instead, it challenges the reader to engage with the "radical" claims of classical theism and the implications that divine simplicity demands. For Mullins, the radical claim that Thomism imposes on its adherents is the necessity of embracing the determinism to which he argues it inevitably leads.

However, accepting the "radicalness" of the doctrine, Mullins insists, always ends in a modal collapse that forces one of two conclusions: that either God is simple and consequently *not* free or that God is *not* simple thereby protecting divine freedom by allowing for actual possibility to be a real reality (contra conceptual) in God. Contrary to the doctrine, Mullins' point is really quite simple: either one accepts the first claim of divine simplicity, thereby denying *any* freedom in God or creation, or one accepts the second claim, thereby protecting divine and creaturely freedom at the expense of the "simple" God. The first claimant is Thomistically defended by allowing for the possibility of "multiple worlds" viz. *God is ontologically simple even though God's accidental properties can be different across the plenitude of free possibilities possible to God*. Stump also admits to this "real" problem:

> On the face of it, it seems that some composition [in God] must remain. That is because we make a distinction – an apparently *real* distinction among intrinsic characteristics of God – between those divine acts of will that are the same in all possible worlds and those that vary across

[61] Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles,* trans. The English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1924), II.9, 12.

[62] The present article from Mullins…is selected as a sampling of a wider body of literature. His is certainly not a univocal expression of other critics; however, his is presented as a particularly poignant rejoinder. For other samplings see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature: the Aquinas Lecture, 1980* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2017); William Lane Craig, *God over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), as well as numerous articles, interviews, debates, etc.

> possible worlds. If we can make such a distinction, if God can be responsive in virtue of not being the same in all possible worlds, then it seems that he cannot be simple.[63]

Her defense of Aquinas on this point seems counterintuitive as she insists that God's willing to create is only conditionally necessitated by the fact that he did in fact create. And more, that he created *this* world and not *that* world. This, she insists, does not preclude the possibility that God could have created that world, only that this world is immediately accessible to our conditional appropriation of God's effulgence. But the same eternal act of divine will that willed this world is compossible to the same eternal act of will that could have willed a world where God exists without any creation or a different kind of creation altogether. This, she says, does not change the intrinsic essence of God.[64]

Mullins responds to this explanation as repugnant to the doctrine of divine simplicity. He maintains that if God is *actus purus* as Thomism affirms, then there can be no potential "act" in God that does not obtain, even of the so-called accidental properties, since that would suggest that God is externally conditioned. For example, when God is revealed as Creator, it is an accidental property that is actualized in this world by the act of God creating. God can only be Creator if there is a creation; therefore, in this tautological schema, the creation conditions the Creator who creates. It's like calling a toddler a parent because someday they will bear a child who will make them the parent that they always were. Within the analytic field, this kind of ontological circularity is nonsensical. God as Creator may not obtain in a world where God does not create. Does this infer that God is no longer Creator? If that is so, then "Creator" is a property that is added to God by virtue of God's action, which means that there is something "external" to God's *esse* that is conditioning God's being. In this case, God ceases to be simple. This is Mullins' claim.[65]

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[63] Stump, *Aquinas*, 122.

[64] Stump, *Aquinas*, 124-125.

[65] This does not preclude a world (possible or actual) that is in logical contradiction to the essence of God: that is, *God cannot create a world that is evil or bad or not-good since God is goodness itself*. Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 194-196.

To illustrate this, he posits a thought experiment where he imagines a universe that contains another R.T. Mullins with an essence similar to his own. However, the "Mullins" essence cannot be identical in both worlds since the "this-world" Mullins has been conditioned by the "this-world" reality. As such, God is limited in the sense that even God cannot actualize identical "Mullins" in different worlds; thus, God has unactualized potential in a logical negation of *actus purus*.[66] Or, perhaps, one might posit an infinite number of worlds where every potential is actualized. This too presents problems in that it incurs a fatalism of *all that could happen does happen by necessity*.[67] Or, he suggests, one could simply allow the modal collapse to obtain so that God and creation intrinsically cohere, thereby allaying all contingency, whether in God or in creation.

While he does not deal with the entire scope of the Thomistic defense, he does try to anticipate some of the responses. For example, he states, "The standard Thomist reply is to say that God wills Himself as the ultimate end of absolute necessity, but only wills creation of conditional or suppositional necessity."[68] He insists that this reply smuggles diversity into God by ignoring earlier propositions of a single, eternal act of will that both wills itself and concurrently wills God's will to create, inhering discrete modalities within God that are contradictory to simplicity and freedom. Thus, for Mullins, divine simplicity is to be rejected.

Conclusion

The doctrine of divine simplicity emerges as a pivotal aspect of classical theism, intricately woven into both the historical and philosophical fabric of Christian thought. I maintain that this doctrine remains essential for articulating a coherent understanding of the divine. This chapter has explored its development from its philosophical roots to its theological deployment by selectively appraising its

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[66] Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 195.

[67] Mullins, "Simply Impossible," footnote 54. Mullins makes an interesting observation that the concept of the multi-verse is an ancient one found in thinkers like Aristotle and the 14th century theologian, Nicole Oresme.

[68] Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 199.

articulations through the key historical figures of Plato, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. This historical journey of divine simplicity reveals its dynamic nature even as contemporary scholars such as Eleonore Stump and R.T. Mullins demonstrate its continued relevance in theological discourse. As Gavin Ortlund notes, "[If divine simplicity] ultimately needs to be removed, a doctrine so embedded in the church's life and worship throughout the centuries probably requires something more like a surgical procedure than a swift amputation."[69]

Moreover, this chapter has outlined how divine simplicity historically leans towards determinism, presenting challenges in reconciling divine freedom with creaturely agency. The intricate interplay of divine simplicity with concepts such as immutability, impassibility, and timelessness demonstrate its complexity and importance in theological discussions. In the next chapter, we will explore how these interpretations of divine simplicity can lead to a deterministic understanding that contradict our notions of freedom, further complicating the relationship between Creator and creature. Ultimately, while divine simplicity remains a cornerstone of theological inquiry, it invites ongoing reflection and dialogue to navigate the intricate balance between divine sovereignty and human freedom, ensuring that our theological frameworks are both robust and responsive to contemporary concerns.

[69] Gavin Ortlund, "Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective," 443.

II. Divine Freedom and Determinism: Freedom's False Dilemma

Introduction

Having traced the development of the doctrine of divine simplicity from its philosophical origins to its theological integration within Christianity, we now turn to a critical examination of its impact on our understanding of freedom. The apophatic grammar of classical theism, while safeguarding the transcendence of the divine, has faced numerous criticisms in recent years. Critics argue that the inherent logic of this system leads to a deterministic worldview, where neither God nor creation truly experiences freedom.

In Part I, we will explore these critiques by following the logic that has prompted many to abandon the doctrine altogether. My goal is to demonstrate that within classical theism, a poorly conceived apophasis results in a non-sequitur concerning divine and creaturely freedom. This investigation seeks to determine whether such determinism and denial of freedom are indeed unavoidable outcomes. However, the concept of "freedom" to which we appeal, is not univocal, necessitating further clarification. Therefore, Part II will differentiate between "libertarian freedom" and "teleological freedom," favoring the latter and establishing a framework for understanding the nuances involved. This distinction will prove crucial, as it will inform our analysis of whether the apophatic tradition restricts the cataphatic claims about God as revealed in Scripture. Ultimately, this chapter addresses a pressing theological concern: does the apophaticism of classical theism render freedom moot or merely epiphenomenal, suggesting that God either ordains evil or is subject to a greater necessity, such as an all-sovereign "plan"?

Part I: The Non Sequitur of Freedom

We begin with R.T. Mullins' provocative claim: "All that is needed – to show that divine simplicity is false – is the claim that God is free."[70] While I do not concur with Mullins' final denial of

[70] R. T. Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 199.

simplicity, his observation is astute. Critics like Mullins and others[71] argue: if God is free, then God is not simple and is mutable, passible, and temporal; conversely, if God is simple, then God is not free and remains immutable, impassible, and atemporal. Central to this debate is the *prima dogma* of divine simplicity. In this section, I propose that classical theism's core doctrines are inexorably linked, deriving their essence from simplicity itself. I maintain that classical articulations begin with divine simplicity as the essential doctrine from which the remaining three necessarily derive arguing that classical articulations fundamentally concern a single attribute, qualified in three successive doctrines. In what follows, I will demonstrate how each derivative doctrine is merely a nuanced rearticulation of divine simplicity. Concurrently, I will show how critics of classical theism arrive at the final derivative and unintended "doctrine" of fatalistic determinism and briefly explore some of the resultant theological implications.

The Problem of Determinism

What do we mean when we say God is simple? This question lies at the heart of our exploration and is not easily answered. The long tradition of articulations affirming some form of simplicity has undergirded all classical iterations of theism, establishing divine simplicity as the raison d'être for subsequent theological formulations. Karl Barth, who maintained a complex relationship with the doctrine of divine simplicity, recognized this as an unfortunate reality. He highlighted how orthodox dogmatics became ensnared in logical reflections without scriptural grounding:

> If we examine its treatment of the *simplicitas Dei*, we can only be amazed at the way in which orthodox dogmatics entered on and lost itself in the logical and mathematical reflections. For the results reached it naturally could not produce a single scriptural proof, and yet this was to form the fundamental presupposition of its whole doctrine of God and therefore finally of its whole Christian doctrine.[72]

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[71] For example, William Lane Craig and Alvin Plantinga who rest their denial of simplicity upon the omniscience of God in a modern articulation of the 16th century theologian, Luis de Molina. Or Jürgen Moltmann's *passionate* and passible God, resting upon Jesus' cry of dereliction. Additionally, biblical scholarship is increasingly wary of the apparent incongruencies of classical theism with Scripture itself, for example, Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 14 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[72] Barth, *CD, II.1*, 457. To be clear, Barth was not denying divine simplicity but bemoaning its starting point that was outside of Scripture. He reasons that this was a betrayal of the revelatory nature of divine love insofar as it is human deduction rather than divine revelation.

When simplicity is treated as a philosophical starting point detached from the revealed God of Scripture, it devolves into a form of pure negation contrary to the scriptural grammar which allows us to articulate certain truths about God. In the following analysis, I will demonstrate how a poorly conceived apophasis can lead to a deterministic framework that conflicts with the God revealed in Scripture.

1) God is simple – not composed of parts; non-compositional – and cannot be made more or less God by adding to Godself anything. God is pure actuality without any potential, as potential implies a being who is compositionally incomplete. Therefore, God is non-created, non-compositional, non-material being. There is nothing ad extra that constitutes God's being or precedes God's being. God is uncreated being. I affirm this. Yet the language is mere negation, telling us what God is not. God's simplicity is rarely defined because, as the reasoning goes, there is no analogue for God in creation, and so we cannot deign to say what God is, lest we make God into the image of God's own reflection. In the most dogged advocates, this rule supersedes Scripture itself, so that even where it speaks of God in cataphatic ways, the standard reply is an appeal to anthropomorphism. To be sure, there are clear anthropomorphic passages that are intuitively, even easily, identified: e.g. "the right hand of God." In that regard, I would even suggest that the "holiness" of God is an anthropomorphic ascription insofar as "holy" is a referent to that which is "set apart" or "distinctly other," implying a divine relationship of God to not-God. In fact, the ascription of "holy" given to God is, in some sense, an apophatic articulation of what God is not: i.e., God is not human. God is wholly other.

2) Consequently, God is immutable *because* God is simple. Change, in any form, suggests a potentiality external to God, undermining the very essence of divine simplicity. This reality presents formidable challenges when we scrutinize the revealed nature of God in Scripture. Consider God's dialogue with Abraham regarding the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, wherein God seems to "change" God's mind (Gen. 18:16-33). The standard retort to this is an appeal to God's omniscience, positing that God already knew there were not 50 righteous individuals (or 45, or 40, or 30, etc.). Yet, we must also grapple with God's intention to withdraw in frustration from the discontented Israelites in the desert,

where Moses audaciously insists that the encampment will not progress unless God's presence accompanies them (Ex. 36:7-14). Did God's mind truly "change"? Or is this merely another instance of anthropomorphic language accommodating God's self-revelation?

One might attempt to navigate these queries with exegetical gymnastics and clever homiletics. However, we cannot overlook the resurrected Christ, who, in his redeemed and glorified body, is forever ascended to the throne over creation, reigning as the God-man. This very Christ is known by the scars in His hands and feet – scars that were absent prior to His crucifixion, present now (and forever?) in his resurrected form. How is this not change? A simple *reductio ad anthropomorphismus* will not suffice. Is this not accidental change that has somehow imprinted itself onto the essence of the divine? Such inquiries compel us to confront the implications of the classical formulation of divine simplicity, which necessitates an immutable God. We must begin to ask these questions, as they strike at the heart of how we understand the divine nature and its relationship to the unfolding narrative of Scripture.

3) Additionally, God is said to be impassible, devoid of passion or pathos, and unaffected by anything external to God *in se*. A passible God would be motivated by compassion and grief, experiencing joy and anger. As Jürgen Moltmann insists, a passible God is one who cries in dereliction from the cross, expressing His sense of God-forsakenness.[73] A passible God would seem to be the God of Scripture. Historically, the Christian tradition has affirmed impassibility, facing little opposition until the 20th century when substantial discussion and dissent began to emerge. Theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, Richard Bauckham, and Alan Torrance,[74] along with a plethora of dissenters in process theology and open theism, have brought this doctrine to the forefront of theological discourse. Even

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[73] "God became man that dehumanized men might become true men. We become true men in the community of the incarnate, the suffering and loving, the human God." Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: 40th Anniversary Edition*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 339. Kindle.

[74] Moltmann, *The Crucified God: 40th Anniversary Ed.*; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Dikran Y. Hadidian, Trevor A. Hart, and Daniel P. Thimell, eds., *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World: Essays Presented to James Torrance*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 25 (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 1989).

staunch classical defenders, such as D.A. Carson, a biblical exegete, have wrestled with impassibility as it relates to the God revealed in Scripture.[75]

Understanding impassibility is arguably the most challenging of the classical doctrines. I am neither advocating for nor defending these positions; rather, I aim to demonstrate how each doctrine derives from simplicity and emphasize that we cannot disregard Scripture for the sake of our philosophical grammar or even our theological commitments.

4) God is timeless or atemporal since time is an ever-expanding, even infinite, addition of moments. God does not experience the passage of time, since moving from present to future requires change. Existing outside of time, God's knowledge is not accumulated dynamically from past to future. While we cannot predict the future with certainty because our temporal existence only experiences the present as actual, God perceives past, present, and future as a unified "eternal now."[76] Classical theists argue that God's knowledge of the future does not interfere with human freedom to choose or experience events as real in the finite present. They assert that God's atemporal knowledge does not determine what a free agent will do; instead, God's atemporality encompasses everything that has occurred or will occur within God's timeless frame. However, this raises a question: If God knows every moment of temporal existence as part of an eternal reality, does this affect our freedom to act otherwise? One might wonder if absolute divine knowledge implies determinism or if acknowledging potentialities introduces complexity into God's knowledge. This question underscores the challenge of reconciling divine knowledge with human freedom without confining God's transcendence to temporal categories. It acknowledges the complexity of contemplating potentiality in creation without attributing any potentiality to God. Despite these nuanced considerations, the perceived implication of determinism remains a contentious issue among critics of classical theism.

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[75] D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? (2nd Edition): Reflections On Suffering And Evil* (La Vergne: IVP, 2020).

[76] Even the word "now" implies a temporality that the apophatic grammar rejects. There is a lot of work presently being done on concepts of time, eternality, presentism, temporality, et al. in metaphysics, philosophy, as well as physics. For an analytic perspective, see R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

In this articulation of classical theism vis-à-vis divine simplicity, the conclusion seems to demand 5) a determinism that derives from God's simplicity: what God "knows" must simply be, since there is no potential in God. Thus, the notion of freedom in God to choose one world over another – or to create or not create – becomes a non-sequitur: God *must* create because God *did* create. Thomism attempts to avoid this conclusion by suggesting the possibility of other types of creation (possible worlds) where God did something different from what God has done in this world. However, this approach falters because if there are infinite possibilities available to God in God's absolute freedom (excluding logical inconsistencies, such as creating a round square or a married bachelor), then the fact that God is both *actus purus* and without inherent potentiality implies that all possible worlds must become actual worlds. In this multiverse, all potential discrete possibilities become realities infinitely expressed; consequently, if all things can happen, then all things do happen. Therefore, all inevitabilities are actualities determined by a God who knows all things.

What has been presented is a distillation of the many critics of classical theism. Consequently, it presents a picture that classical theists would argue is a caricature, poorly constructed by "covert cataphasis"[77] couched in an apophatic grammar: e.g., God is *not* composed of parts, God *cannot* change, God is *not* affected by external stimuli, and God is *without* time. When we speak of God's inability to do something – change, for instance – we ascribe a contingent attribute to God: that is, the in*ability* to accomplish something. This reduces the divine to a creaturely modality where God's inability is a measure of finite creation (cataphasis). Pure apophasis insists that God is beyond our categories of explanation. Therefore, saying God is beyond time or change should not imply limitations as we understand them but an ineffable transcendence.

While this defense holds, the subtlety of expressing it cogently is often lost. People facing life's crises desire a God resembling the one revealed and encountered in Scripture: present, active, empathetic, and powerful. The nuanced distinctions of classical theism are often lost on the average person, whether

[77] My thanks to Jonathon Platter for demonstrating that "covert cataphasis" is the culprit. Any errors that are made in explicating and applying it are mine.

believer or skeptic. Therefore, when our classical articulations fail to provide a grammar that is accessible to the average worshiper or skeptic, denial of the caricature unwittingly becomes a denial of God. Although classical defenders claim that the critics conflate modal semantics with ontology, my concern has been to illustrate how apophatic grammar facilitates this resultant non-sequitur. Whether a misrepresentation or not, the theological implications are profound. We now turn to explore these implications.

Theological Implications

The theological implications bring seemingly abstract philosophical concepts into direct relationship with the life of faith. The practical concerns, as mediated through various theological traditions, offer anecdotal evidence of the confusion classical divine simplicity can create. In the pastoral context, these learned dogmas often reveal the underlying non sequitur, highlighting the impact on everyday belief and practice. For instance, common phrases heard from the pew, reflecting the implied theology from the pulpit, include: “everything happens for a reason” or “God’s got a plan for this.” These sentiments often involve the (mis)appropriation of biblical passages to make sense of tragedy, such as Romans 8:28: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God,” or Ephesians 1:10b-11: “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.” These examples hint at the numerous responses to life's complexities, often interpreted through a poorly conceived classical lens. While this section doesn't aim to strip these aphorisms and prooftexts of their popular use, they underscore the need for proper theological grounding, especially for practitioners. The focus will be on the theological implications of a misappropriated classicism, aiming to move toward a clearer theological articulation that holds essential value for the life of faith, beyond just philosophical abstraction. After all, *how we think about God is how we will speak about God. And how we speak about God will ultimately determine how we live our lives*.

Space does not permit a full treatment of each of the proposed implications, neither are these implications exhaustive, but are carefully selected instances that bear immediate relevance to the

theological articulation of the Christian faith. I will begin with the problem of a modal collapse that conflates God and creation as a single *actus* of God's being. Next, the practical (and moral) implications of this will be explored especially as they relate to *creatio ex nihilo.* This will allow us to examine the consequences of a theological system of inferred or explicit of determinism and its theodicean implications.

Modal Collapse

The modal collapse argument highlights the challenge of discussing God as both simple and distinct from contingencies. The distinction between God and creation is complicated by classical articulations of divine simplicity where God's essence and existence are a single act, implying no unactualized potential. As Mullins notes, "If God's will to create the universe is absolutely necessary, and thus not contingent, then the grounds for the contingency of the universe will disappear."[78] Here, necessity and contingency collapse into each other, merging creational contingency with the metaphysics of God *in se*. The issue becomes evident in classical theism: if God is *actus purus*, then God's actions are essential to God's being. As such, Norman Kretzmann, a Thomistic defender, claims that this necessitates an inevitability in Aquinas' understanding of God that mitigates God's freedom. I suggest that it also causes a modal collapse. According to James Dolezal, Kretzmann maintains that God's goodness is naturally self-diffusing, which is to say, God cannot *not* diffuse God's goodness. Consequently, God cannot *not* create a world where goodness effulges: i.e. there is no world where God *is* and creation *is not*. In other words, "[God] is not free to choose whether to create, but only what to create."[79] While he is decidedly *not* espousing Aquinas' own view, his conclusions were reached whilst attempting to reconcile the difficulties within Thomism. As such, he is willing to sacrifice God's freedom in defense of God's

[78] Ryan Mullins and Shannon Byrd, "Divine Simplicity and Modal Collapse: A Persistent Problem," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14, no. 3 (October 22, 2022): 29.

[79] James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 192.

simplicity and, ironically in the process, denude simplicity itself by making creation a necessity to God's being viz. modal collapse.

For Dolezal, the final analysis is the *mysterium tremendum*. While I agree that God is beyond conception and infinite in God's pleroma, I do not find this a satisfactory response to the difficulties raised by this doctrine. God will remain incomprehensible; but our doctrines should not be. This statement, of course, runs the risk of suggesting that there is a system – a systematic theology, perhaps – that can supply a comprehensive doctrine. That is not my point. Instead, if the best we can do to prevent a modal collapse is to say, "God is a mystery," then we have failed in the task of knowing God at all. Perhaps a Pauline appeal to the "mystery, now revealed" (Col. 1:24-27) in Jesus Christ could form the basis of a necessary rejoinder. Regardless, the modal collapse, presents greater problems than just inarticulate expressions of divine mystery. Indeed, when followed all the way through, the modal collapse, itself, abolishes the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Modal Collapse and Creatio ex Nihilo

Assuming the difficulties that Kretzmann presents, progression from a modal collapse to the denial of *creatio ex nihilo* is relatively straightforward: (i) If God is *actus purus* then the mere existence of this world (regardless of the existence of other possible worlds) indicates that God willed this particular world out of divine necessity. Consequently, (ii) if this world is the necessary act of God – by virtue of its actualization – then it could not be otherwise. This leads to (iii) the conclusion that God created this world necessarily, by virtue of God's being *in se*. Therefore, (iv) God's being requires this world for God's own perfection; that is, God would not be perfectly God apart from this world, since it was created out of the necessity of God's being. As a result, *creatio ex nihilo* is effectively abolished in favor of a softer version of *creatio ex Deus*, akin to the views held by some in process theology.[80] If God's essential being is intrinsically linked to God *in se* rather than causally linked, we are left with a *creatio qua Deus*,

[80] For example, see Thomas J. Oord, "Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Problem," *Thomas Jay Oord* (blog), January 19, 2010, accessed December 9, 2024, https://thomasjayoord.com/index.php/blog/archives/creatio_ex_nihilo_the_problem.

culminating in a metaphysical crisis that can only be described as pantheistic. Thus, God's simplicity disappears amidst the compositional complexity of God-plus-creation, leading to a range of moral implications that challenge any meaningful articulation of faith.

First, this view displaces the transcendent, ineffable God of creation to a position of super-eminence, where God becomes a super-being among beings. While this may suggest priority and authority, it ultimately reduces God to the status of a venerated creature rather than a transcendent God. Consequently, this compositional deity is made vulnerable to de-composition. We may suggest that God has an eternal future, but we cannot worship this god as the God who has no beginning: the uncaused Cause. A compositional god must have had a cause that preceded his own being. Very soon, we find ourselves prostrate before the idea of Plato's eternal Form with the fire flickering on the cave wall before us.

Second, it makes evil a necessary aspect of God, as it inheres in creation itself. If the modal collapse dictates the nature of the God we worship, we cannot escape seeing this god reflected in every instance of suffering: in every abused child, gulag, gas chamber, racist beating, or starving baby. It is not merely that evil and sin are subsumed by a graciously incarnated God on an executioner's cross; rather, these realities become integral to the existence of this god. This god does not merely take evil; this god is evil.

Lastly, it challenges the nature of eschatological hope. Irenaeus' famous axiom, "God became [human] that [humanity] might become god," reflects the profound hope seen by St. Paul, who anticipated the day when "God [would] be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28b). This hope envisions creation's increasing participation in the eternal glory of God, who transcends and permeates creation. However, a modal collapse suggests a different end altogether, reducing eschatological hope to a static inevitability, where natural laws govern and even determine a bleak, predictable outcome. In this cosmogony, even God is subject to the same laws that lead creation toward entropy. In this cosmos, the prophets are those who claim, "The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom,

no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."[81] This view ultimately offers no true telos and no hope: no telos, only a terminus.

Determinism as Divine Culpability

Yet some have posited a different kind of determinacy: one where God wills all that is and all that will ever be. In certain theological systems, this is even venerated as holy and good, where every event — be it a natural disaster or moral evil such as war, rape, or pedophilia — is predetermined by God and obtains as the *taxis* of divine glory. John Calvin says it even more starkly:

> I again ask how it is that the fall of Adam involves so many nations with their infant children in eternal death without remedy, unless that it so seemed meet to God? Here the most loquacious tongues must be dumb. The decree, I admit, is dreadful; and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before he made him, *and foreknew, because he had so ordained by his decree.*[82]

But the "most loquacious" tongue of David Bentley Hart has little space for such a conclusion.

> For if indeed there were a God whose true nature…were revealed in the death of a child or the dereliction of a soul or a predestined hell, then it would be no great transgression to think of him as a kind of malevolent or contemptible demiurge, and to hate him, and to deny him worship, and to seek a better God than he.[83]

Though these theological implications arise from misrepresentations and misapplications of the philosophical grammar of classical theism, as the caricatures demonstrate, they highlight the need for a clearer articulation of this complex doctrine. These are the pastoral concerns that have motivated this project. Indeed, such caricatures have become a crucible for faith and disbelief, as seen in the critiques of the "new atheists." This is evident in doctrines like limited atonement for an "elect" few and double-predestination, where God seemingly arbitrarily chooses who will be saved and who will be damned.

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[81] Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, Science Masters Series (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 134.

[82] John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion,* Vol 2, trans. Henry Beveridge (The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), Chapter XXIII.7, 568-569. Italics added. Or again, earlier in the same text when speaking of the so-called doctrine of double predestination, "there could be no election without its opposite reprobation…Those, therefore, whom God passes by he reprobates, and that for no other cause but because he is pleased to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines to his children," Chapter XXIII.1, 560.

[83] David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 91.

While some argue that these doctrines preserve God's freedom, they essentially stem from a misarticulated doctrine of divine simplicity and its resulting determinism. Here, fatalism is a more fitting term than mere determinism. As noted, God's foreknowledge of human sin through the Adamic fall implies a "positive" divine ordination, leading to a theology that associates sin and evil with God's essential being, making God the *prima causa* of evil. Although this might seem to address the problem of evil, it does so at the expense of God's goodness. Theistic history has always aimed to reconcile the world's brokenness and suffering with a transcendent, good God. Unfortunately, a theology of actual determinism offers a simplistic and contemptible solution: *God did it.*

Doubtless, the previous statement will be rejoined with some version of compatibilism which ultimately implies a logical absurdity. For instance, D.A. Carson says,

> 1. God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated. 2. Human beings are morally responsible creatures—they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God *absolutely contingent*.[84]

Whether one sees God as "absolutely contingent" or merely conditionally so, the absurdity is irreconcilable with divine simplicity where there is no contingency in God at all! Ultimately, the claim of the compatibilist is incompatible with divine simplicity and must simply be ascribed to "divine mystery" at the expense of any cogency. Dolezal concludes his own work on this point, espousing the mystery as a "confession of ignorance."[85] While the humility that this stance necessarily entails is one that should be emulated, it must equally be stated that ignorance of the pleroma of God's infinite beatitude is not synonymous with inconsistency, certainly not when we are speaking of God.

The theological implications of divine simplicity present challenges in aligning classical theism with the lived experience of faith. It risks a modal collapse, raising concerns about God's freedom and the nature of creation, suggesting a determinism that conflicts with the biblical portrayal of a relational and

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[84] Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 179. Italics added.

[85] Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 210.

transcendent God. This view inadvertently associates God with evil, leading to diminished eschatological hope and potentially resulting in fatalistic despair or loss of belief. When our theological and philosophical frameworks drive us toward determinism, freedom is implicitly denied, reducing creation and creatures to a terminus devoid of true hope. Therefore, we now turn to the crucial question of defining freedom, exploring its teleological dimensions in contrast to libertarian perspectives.

PART II: DEFINING FREEDOM

In this section, we delve into the intricate relationship between divine simplicity and the concept of freedom, focusing on Karl Barth's nuanced contributions. Barth's theological endeavors are particularly relevant due to his strained relationship with classical theism, especially its reliance on philosophical propositions that often stand in tension with scriptural revelation. Consequently, he was wary of propositional statements about God, insisting that "The concept of truths of revelation in the sense of Latin propositions given and sealed once for all with divine authority in both wording and meaning is theologically impossible…"[86] This tension reflects the broader theme of our exploration: the complex interplay between the apophatic grammar of philosophy and the cataphatic grammar of Scripture. Therefore, we will examine Barth's contributions in two stages: first, *aseity as the ground of divine freedom*, and second, *Jesus Christ as the reality of divine freedom*. Ultimately, this foundation will guide our inquiry into what it means to say God is free and how this divine freedom underpins creaturely freedom, contrasting teleological freedom with libertarian freedom.

Aseity as the Ground of Divine Freedom: Free From

In what follows, the two Barthian interpreters, Paul Molnar and Bruce McCormack, offer up their respective readings of Barth with rare points of agreement, each offering a different (and sometimes adversarial) interpretation to Barth and to each other. Yet, the fundamental premise applies to both authors, namely, that the *aseity of God is the grounding of divine freedom*. However, how each understands this central claim proves interesting and necessary to critically hearing Barth's own voice

[86] Barth, *CD* I/1, 15.

amongst the bevy of interpretations. Thus, we will take it in two parts: Molnar's interpretation of Barth's concept of freedom that tends toward a divine (and radical) autonomy and McCormack's appraisal of Molnar's reading as tending toward Enlightenment sensibilities.

Divine Autonomy: Molnar's Barth

We dare not begin a survey of Barth without mentioning an influencing voice in his own theological understanding: Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach cautiously accepted a form of his Idealist predecessors that said that self-awareness connotes a divine awareness such that knowing God is tantamount to an anthropological awareness of self. Yet, Feuerbach recognized the danger of maintaining this as constitutive of theological inquiry. When humanity seeks to know God by knowing itself, it will ultimately end with anthropomorphic projections of "finite existence on the screen of eternity."[87] Thus, with Barth, revelation of the divine must never begin with an anthropocentric locus; instead, God must be God *in se* if God is God at all. This forms the root of Barth's own understanding of divine aseity. God as *ipsum esse subsistens* is the fundamental claim that God exists in and of Godself: God is *not* composed. The implication is a rejoinder to any who would seek to define divine freedom by continuing the mistake of Idealism viz. human freedom. Thus, in true apophasis, God is "free" from humanity's concepts of freedom. So, for Barth, freedom always finds its proper start in God *a se*. [88]

> From all eternity God could have excluded man from this covenant. He could have delivered him up to himself and allowed him to fall. He could have refused to will him at all. He could have avoided the compromising of His freedom by not willing to create him. *He could have remained satisfied with Himself and with the impassible glory and blessedness of His own inner life*.[89]

Molnar's reading of Barth echoes this as a central axis around which all of Barth's theology is constructed. He summarizes this view by quoting George Hunsinger: "God would be no less God if He

[87] Barth, *CD* I/1, 31.

[88] The Latin root of aseity.

[89] Barth, *CD,* II/2, 166.

had created no world and no human being."[90] In this sense, God is understood as free *from* creation in that God is not bound to what Molnar describes as a "mutually conditioning relationship" where "Christ's human nature has its reality only in and through the Word, 'so too the Word only has reality through and in humanity.'"[91] Thus, divine freedom finds its starting point in divine aseity which is in turn rooted in the tri-unity of the Godhead,[92] thereby ensuring classical theism's central claim of divine simplicity, that God is not composed of anything other than God: God *is*.

Divine Possibility: McCormack's Rebuttal

Yet, Bruce McCormack presents a problem with Molnar's reading while also maintaining a Barthian perspective.[93] In his curt rebuttal to Molnar's stylistic mockery of dissenters, he questions Molnar's own reading of Barth's understanding of divine freedom. He claims that Molnar reads Enlightenment ideals into Barth that harken back to Feuerbach's own warning of anthropomorphizing God.[94] If divine freedom is "autonomous freedom" commensurate with Enlightenment ideals, then it seems to suggest that Molnar's own ascetic ideals dissolve under the weight of a God who dwells in a world of possibility. "[Molnar seems] to suggest that God could have chosen to do other than what He did in election, that God had other possibilities from which to choose, and, therefore, that even now God has

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[90] Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*, Second edition (New York: T & T Clark, 2017), 134.

[91] Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, 141. Quoting from *CD* I/2, 166.

[92] See Platter, *Divine Simplicity and the Triune Identity*. While this current project does not deal with the broadly leveled charge that God's tri-unity is oppositional to divine simplicity, Platter's work wrestles with that very thing. Interestingly, his treatment grounds simplicity in the doctrine of the Trinity rather than the more common approach of trying to ground the Trinity in the doctrine of simplicity.

[93] Bruce L. McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly: A Response to Paul Molnar," *Theology Today* 67, no. 1 (April 2010): 57–65. David Bentley Hart referred to McCormack as "the most accomplished scholar of Barth in this country." David Bentley Hart, *Theological Territories: A David Bentley Hart Digest* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 65.

[94] German theologian, Trutz Rendtorff, sees in Barth a semi-sympathetic participant in Enlightenment ideology. Rather than humanity's freedom, understood as a quality of "radical autonomy" or libertarian freedom, God as Subject has "pure freedom," and accordingly, absolute autonomy that actualizes reality in divinely free action. Consequently, theology is subordinated to the realm of ethics where "human freedom is…constituted in the creaturely act of reflecting divine action." See Brian D. Asbill, *The Freedom of God for Us: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Divine Aseity*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, v. 25 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 19.

in Himself unrealized potentialities."[95] Instead, McCormack's own reading of Barth leads him to his own startling claim: "[Freedom] in God is not a choice among options. It is rather the power to do all that is in God to do. In God, there are no unrealized potentialities."[96] Thus, in a kind of homage to Rahner's Rule, McCormack's appraisal finds an echo in Barth's own words:

> It is, therefore, right that in the development and explanation of the statement that God is we have always to keep exclusively to His works (as they come to pass, or become visible as such in the act of revelation) – not only because we cannot elsewhere understand God and who God is, but also because, even if we could understand Him elsewhere, we should understand Him only as the One He is in His works, because He is this One and no other.[97]

Additionally, Barth cannot conceive of God's aseity defined as independence from creaturely deficit (covert cataphasis), since this would threaten to relegate God to nothing more than a reflection of humanity, albeit an exalted reflection.[98] Similarly, God's aseity must not be commended as a "proof" of God's existence as this too makes God's *isness* dependent upon human understanding or knowledge.[99] On this point, Barth is clear if not redundant: God *is* because God *is*. There is no recourse for *any* knowledge of God other than Godself. Herein is the oft-heralded revelation for which Barth is celebrated:

> According to the self-attestation of His revelation, God is free to reveal His existence within the sphere of the reality that is distinct from Himself. Notice that it is His existence, therefore the existence of Him whose being is clearly differentiated from the whole realm of this reality. But it is His *existence*, that is to say His being, independent of our thought about it, preceding and providing the basis for our thought, absolutely objective.[100]

Therefore, God's revealed *esse* is an expression of God's freedom. Indeed, God's aseity and God's freedom form near synonyms in Barth. "[God] shows and proves in His revelation His freedom to

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[95] McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly," 60.

[96] McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly," 60-61.

[97] Barth, *CD,* II/1, 260. Molnar suggests that Rahner's wider thinking beyond the so-called "rule" actually serves to collapse the immanent Trinity into the economic as a throw-back to Luther's *mutual conditioning* of Creator and contingent, each conditioning the other as necessary corollaries. See Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, 131-132 footnote.

[98] Asbill, *The Freedom of God,* 138.

[99] Asbill, *The Freedom of God,* 138.

[100] Barth, *CD,* II/1, 304.

begin with Himself…"[101] God grounds God's existence freely in himself. God's freedom and autonomy is God's lordship.[102] To this point, McCormack defends his position against Molnar's indictment that he confuses epistemology and ontology when he says, "I have held all along that revelation, for Barth, is an act of Self-*interpretation*."[103] Yet, the only reason we can speak of divine revelation at all is because God's free Self-interpretation is bound to the contingent. Or said differently: God is freely God within God's being but is freely revealed to that which is not God. Therefore, what is termed *Free From* in the above heading, is now manifested as a freedom *for*: i.e., revelation of God's *isness* in Christ Jesus, to which we now turn.

Jesus Christ as the Revelation of Divine Freedom: Free For

In the discourse that follows, we will examine Barth's own claim that Jesus Christ is the reality, or more properly, the revelation of divine freedom. In Barth, Jesus is revealed as both object and Subject of God's freedom. But different from God's aseity that exalts and differentiates God *in se* beyond creation, the object/Subject motif in Barth's Christology brings the focus of God's freedom into the heart of creation in the Incarnation. The happy consequence is that the God that is "free from" the contingent is now revealed as "free for" (*pro nobis*) God's creation. But this exploration finds us in murky waters. First, Barth's own Christological claims came as a late (and gradual) development in his corpus, a reality McCormack tries to elucidate. Second, Barth's Christological claims lead McCormack into some equally murky conclusions that require both explication as well as McCormack's own defense and explanation. Examining these claims will help us draw some hopeful concluding observations of the gratuity of God's freedom *for* humanity as we attempt to settle upon a proper definition of divine freedom and the attending creaturely freedom.

The Christ "Event": Late Development of Barth's Christology

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[101] Barth, *CD,* II/1, 304.

[102] Asbill, *The Freedom of God,* 20.

[103] McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly," 63.

"God's revelation is ultimately identical with God himself."[104] In this sense, revelation is a discrete historical "event" that occurs within creation because it occurs in God *in se*. However, Joseph Mangina suggests that this "event" language can create a confusion that overly and overtly historizes God, particularly in Jesus Christ. "Because [revelation] is identical with God himself, the Word cannot be identified with any worldly object – except in so far as God graciously wills to meet us there, as he does in Jesus Christ."[105] This confusion has formed a basis of scholarly debate about the development of Barthian thought from his early dogmatics to his later work. It is suggested, says Molnar, that Barth's later Christological formulations were so historicized that it betrayed his earlier work, even undermining Barth's earlier trinitarian formulations in view of the "event" of Jesus Christ (i.e., God's free electing of Jesus as God's redemptive act toward humanity), the consequence being that God could not have been triune without us.[106] To this point, Molnar cites Benjamin Myers: "Jesus is not merely epistemologically significant, as the one who makes God known; *he is ontologically significant as the one who (so to speak) makes God God*."[107] While this pejorative against Barthian readers cannot be remedied with a simple word-swap, Mangina offers an alternative word to help mitigate the confusion: rather than "event" he suggests that "activity" would be a helpful substitute.[108] Regardless, the veracity of the arguments on all sides prove that Barth's Christology is essential to his literary corpus.

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[104] Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 33. This deceptively simple statement is flatly rejected by Barth's former student, Helmut Gollwitzer, who maintains that this objectifies God by constraining God to humanity's encounter with revelation. See Asbill, *The Freedom of God*, 23.

[105] Mangina, *Karl Barth,* 33.

[106] Paul D. Molnar, *Faith, Freedom, and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 260–261.

[107] Molnar, *Divine Freedom,* 138.

[108] Mangina, *Karl Barth*, 34.

McCormack attempts to map this shift in his seminal work on Barth, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology.*[109] Rather than decisive events that marked transition (or development) in Barth's thinking, McCormack cites Hans Urs von Balthasar's appraisal that it was a gradual shift from the first volume of *Church Dogmatics* (*CD* I/1-2), where Christology "remains in the background," to the third volume (*CD* II/1), where it emerges as the essential locus of all successive work.[110] In McCormack's final analysis, however, even von Balthasar's subtleties were not subtle enough. He found a "gradual" shift in Barth that dates the beginning of Barth's "Christological recentering" to a series of early lectures that would later form the content of *CD* II/2.[111] This recentering gave way to one of Barth's fundamental ways of expressing the freedom of God, namely, that "God determines or elects Himself as the One that loves in freedom to be God for us *in* Jesus Christ *and* that this elective moment is one with its content, so that Jesus Christ is both the Subject and the Object of divine election."[112] Christ is both the elector and the elected; he is both the *Logos asarkos* and the *Logos ensarkos*.

God Becoming Christ: McCormack's Troubling Conclusions

How McCormack expresses this, however, threatens to ally Barth too closely with Hegel. In his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Barth (2000)*, McCormack suggests that "if God is God only insofar as He elects to be God for us in Christ, then 'God is triune *for the sake* of his revelation."[113] Thus, there is no immanent Trinity if there is no economic Trinity. This threatens a backward ontology of God which suggests that God is *becoming* something that God is not already *in se*. This is untenable. While I

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[109] Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[110] McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 2-4.

[111] Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology*, Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 120.

[112] Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity,* 120

[113] Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity,* 121. Given Hegel's own commitments to Aristotelian categories, one might conclude a congruency between Hegel and Aquinas in content if not in ultimate conclusions.

am sympathetic to McCormack, Ulrich Hedinger offers a cogent response: "God's freedom does not abolish God's unity, but rather establishes it. The freedom of God does not point to the sum of *unending possibilities*, but rather to the one reality of God in Jesus Christ."[114] Jesus Christ, then, is the revelation of God's freedom *for* us. In Christ, humanity is graciously chosen by the covenantal and covenanting God. It is all grace, through-and-through. McCormack's reading of Barth erodes God's freedom insofar as God is *not* free to be triune apart from God's creation which, itself, forms the basis of God's actualization as Trinity in the "event" of the *Logos ensarkos*. Thus, God's freedom to be ontologically relational (Trinity) is constrained by God's dependency upon creation rather than as an expression of actual freedom apart from creation.

It seems appropriate to allow McCormack some space to respond, which he does in his reply to Molnar. He saw within Barth's language of Jesus Christ as both the *object* and the *Subject* of election an "eternal determination of the second Person of the Trinity to become incarnate in time."[115] N.b., *not* an eternal "existence" of Jesus Christ; thus, the determination was to *be* something and not necessarily to *do* something. What was he to be, or better, to become? McCormack points to Barth's late dogmatics which say that *humility* and *obedience* are proper to God.[116] He continues that if these attributes are essential to God then there must be a kind of plasticity in the essence of God that is coterminous with an "unchanging *substance*,"[117] or said polemically, *God is mutably immutable.* For example: "It takes place in the freedom of God, but in the inner necessity of the freedom of God and not in the play of a sovereign *liberum arbitrium* [free will]. There is no possibility of something quite different happening."[118] If, as Barth often spoke, the Logos has an existence that is prior to the action of self-determination (*Logos*

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[114] Asbill, *The Freedom of God*, 15. Italics added.

[115] McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly," 58.

[116] McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly," 59. Quoting from *CD* IV/1, 193.

[117] McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly," 59.

[118] Barth, *CD,* IV/1, 195.

ensarkos), then this would introduce a mutability into the Divine *esse* that Barth wanted to avoid at all costs.[119]

McCormack's solution to the problem as it is presented is to grant God a kind of eternal freedom *pro nobis,* where God is eternally "turning toward us in the covenant of grace, [such] that we understand that covenant as the act in which God gives Himself His own being and, therefore, structures Himself as triune *for the sake of establishing a redemptive relationship with the human race.*"[120] His point was to provide the largest possible framework for divine freedom by extending its maximal reach toward humanity as an eternal action rather than an historical event. While I cannot concede McCormack's proposal, I can cautiously suggest that it finds a worthy echo in the creedal language of eternal generation. Yet, it also bears the unfortunate consequence of collapsing the economic Trinity in an upward spiration toward the immanent, thereby implying that creation instantiates God rather than God graciously and freely constituting humanity. Consequently, the hypostatic union, which requires top-down movement (i.e., God to human) is reversed so that the contingent approaches the divine with an equality of natures.

The Free God Freeing Humanity: The Grace of Freedom

This begs the question: what *can* be said of Barth's understanding of divine freedom? First, it is knowable by revelation. The divine freedom to lovingly elect the *Logos asarkos* is given content and a name: Jesus Christ. Therefore, God is knowable even if God is not (fully) comprehendible. Moreover, in God's election of the *Logos asarkos,* God is revealed as the *Logos ensarkos* so that all of humanity is represented in Jesus Christ. This countermands Calvin's *decretum absolutum* where God predetermines either the salvation or the damnation of individuals and only subsequently determines the manner of the salvific work: i.e., the crucified *Logos ensarkos*.[121] Instead, God freely and graciously chooses humanity

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[119] McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly," 59.

[120] McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly," 59-60. This seems to betray an essential Trinity that is unconditioned by creation, impugning God's essence with a *becoming* nature.

[121] Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology*, 124.

in Jesus Christ, thereby providing a redemption that is universally efficacious, if not universally received. In electing Christ, God elects humanity; thus, divine freedom becomes the impetus (or the pneumatological energy) of human freedom such that humanity can now freely know God through the *Logos ensarkos*. Which leads to my second observation: human freedom is itself contingent upon divine freedom. T.F. Torrance observes that freedom is not a neutral, abstract concept that exists within the contingent as a quality in and of itself; instead, true freedom – that is, the freedom of the human will to direct itself toward God – is "empty unless God himself wills to give himself to us."[122] Human freedom, apart from God's own free willing for and toward humanity, insists Torrance, is so impaired by sin that the only object of humanity's will is toward ourselves.[123] Thus, what appears as freedom is in actuality usurped and overpowered by sin itself.

Ultimately, this gives us ground for attempting to define what we mean when we speak of divine freedom as well as contingent freedom. Rather than pitting Molnar's reading against McCormack's, I propose that there is a *via media* that encapsulates the best of each while avoiding some of the endemic pitfalls associated with them. To wit, God is free *from* creation insofar as God is non-dependent upon contingency for *isness*: God "simply" *is*. But this freedom is not arbitrary freedom that ignores the constraints of God's own essence; rather, it is defined as God's freedom to be God. And as Barth would remind us again and again, "God's freedom and therefore His simplicity are the freedom and simplicity of His love."[124] Here, Barth finally offers a cataphatic response to the apophatic tradition. His response is rooted in Scriptural revelation and begins to offer us a radical articulation of God's simple freedom: free to love; not free to not love.

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[122] Paul D. Molnar, *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God in Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance* (New York: T &T Clark, 2022), 275–276.

[123] Molnar, *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God*, 276.

[124] Barth, *CD,* II/1, 456.

Divine freedom understood as the divine love of God *a se* is also understood as God's freedom to love creation per se. This is divine freedom *for* other in a Subject/object relationality. Inhered in the trinitarian community, this is revealed in creation through the *Logos ensarkos* so that "in Jesus Christ God has taken man's affairs out of his hands and made them His own affair."[125] This is an exclusive claim that helps us understand humanity's freedom: God's freedom *for* creation is situated in Christ so that anything/anyone separated from Christ is not free. Ultimately, human freedom is only and truly freedom in Christ. Therefore, I am arguing that the incarnation, wherein God makes human affairs God's own affairs, forms the basis for our understanding of what creaturely freedom is as revealed in the hypostasis of Jesus. When Jesus says, "I know where I come from and where I am going" (John 8:14, NASB), we can infer an ontology that encompasses the event of Jesus' humanity within the metaphysics of divine simplicity: what God *is* is that which makes the "Jesus event" free to become what God has always been. In Jesus, and consequently in humanity, there is a divine *a priori* that insists that freedom can only truly obtain when its end (telos) is realized in its beginning (protology).

To this point, I am suggesting that this schema denudes much of what we might call libertarian freedom[126] and recasts genuine freedom as teleological. In this sense, we might even suggest that freedom in God is not libertarian insofar as God cannot contradict God's essence: God is God's own *a priori*. So too in humanity, freedom is not libertarian to do anything that is possible for a human to do. Anything that is contrary to our protological Source – the giver of life – is death, slavery, and decidedly *not* freedom. A borrowed analogy from David Bentley Hart helps elucidate this principle when he says, "Freedom is a being's power to flourish as what it naturally is, to become ever more fully what it is."[127]

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[125] Barth, *CD,* II/1,167.

[126] Libertarian freedom will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. For now, libertarian freedom can be understood as follows: rational individuals are the source of their desires and possess the autonomy to choose from real and available options, thereby making them the causal-agents morally responsible for the effects that result from their choices.

[127] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 172.

For example, freedom is the unhindered growth of an acorn into an oak tree. Thus, the freedom of God embodied in the *Logos ensarkos* is freedom for humanity to flourish and become what it truly is, realized only in its union with God in Christ through the spiration of the Spirit.

In the end, we begin to see how Barth's understanding of divine simplicity and freedom relate and reveal God *a se* as the cornerstone of divine freedom. His challenge to Enlightenment ideals and its anthropocentric projections emphasizes a divine freedom that is inherently rooted in God's self-subsisting nature. Consequently, creaturely freedom is also grounded in God's nature through the hypostasis of Jesus Christ, revealing a God who is free *from* creation while also being free *for* it. Thus, Barth's concept of divine freedom, as interpreted here by Molnar and McCormack, transcends the simplistic notions of "possibility" or "potentiality" that often characterize libertarian freedom. Instead, Barth's understanding of freedom aligns better with the notion of teleological freedom, wherein God's actions are not constrained by potentialities but are expressions of divine purpose and identity. This framework not only reinforces the theological assertion that God is free in and of Godself but also posits that creaturely freedom ultimately resides within the teleological narrative of divine action, reflecting God's purposeful and self-determined nature. The distinctions between libertarian and teleological notions of freedom will be further explored in the next two chapters, particularly regarding their implications within the non-classical paradigm of process theology. However, for now, Barth provides a foundational understanding of divine freedom and its implications for creaturely freedom, while offering a nuanced perspective that bridges classical theistic claims with a robust understanding of both divine and creaturely freedom.

Conclusion

Our critical exploration of the classical doctrine of divine simplicity thus far has compelled us to examine the implications of a deterministic worldview. This non sequitur emerged from a systematic deployment of critiques leveled against classical theism by contemporary scholars. Our examination has demonstrated that the apophatic grammar of classical theism, while aiming to safeguard the transcendence of God, can lead to deterministic conclusions that unintentionally subvert the dynamic relationality of God as presented in Scripture. The theological implications are significant, as this deterministic

framework suggests a lack of telos, rendering God's intentions and purposes within creation seemingly arbitrary. This raises pressing questions about whether traditional formulations of divine simplicity serve their intended theological purpose or inadvertently constrain our understanding of God's nature and action in the world. In short, it begs the question: are we free?

To address this question, we engaged with one of modernity's foremost theological thinkers, Karl Barth. Through the interpretive lenses of Paul Molnar and Bruce McCormack, our focused engagement with Barth culminated in a crucial distinction between libertarian and teleological freedom, which will guide our continued exploration in the succeeding chapters. Ultimately, this inquiry underscores the necessity of revisiting classical doctrines in light of contemporary theological developments, ensuring that our understanding of God remains faithful to both tradition and the revelatory nature of Scripture.

III. Mapping Modernity's Impasse

Introduction

The doctrine of divine simplicity has faced substantial criticism from contemporary detractors who have argued that it inherently demands a deterministic understanding of God that extends to creation. In response, many classical theists defend the doctrine by claiming that the issue lies not within divine simplicity itself, but rather in misconceptions surrounding its technical language and evolution. I contend that these defenses expose an underlying tension that necessitates a more accessible and coherent articulation of the doctrine. Therefore, this chapter aims to engage with the perspectives of both proponents and critics of divine simplicity.

Structured in two parts, the first examines the views of two contemporary thinkers who grapple with determinism while upholding divine simplicity. David Bentley Hart's defense of classical theism, marked by his adherence to traditional dogmas and a corresponding universalism, will be explored alongside Paul R. Hinlicky's notion of "weak simplicity" or eschatological simplicity, which critiques the classical articulation without rejecting it outright. While Hart's approach is grounded in metaphysics and logic, Hinlicky's framework is firmly anchored in the biblical witness.

The second part focuses on those who reject divine simplicity entirely, advocating for a complex conception of God. Here, I will engage with process theology exclusively,[128] where proponents often label their theistic views as Neoclassical, signifying a departure from classical theism. This section will highlight key figures in the process tradition, particularly Thomas Jay Oord, whose understanding of love is central to my argument.[129] Both Oord and I affirm that "God is love" defines God's nature, yet our definitions diverge significantly; Oord's leads to a rejection of simplicity, while mine upholds it. This

[128] Notably absent are simplicity deniers William Lane Craig and Alvin Plantinga, who advocate Molinism, along with theists, like Gregory Boyd, who distance themselves from process theology but affirm a fully open future.

[129] My rationale for prioritizing Oord in this burgeoning field is threefold: first, he has been a process devotee since university (his Ph.D. advisor was David Ray Griffin), making him well-acquainted with the field as both a Christian theist and philosopher. Second, he is prolific, with a clear, provocative, and accessible literary corpus spanning decades, along with an extensive online presence. Lastly, we share a common theological tradition within the Church of the Nazarene, providing a shared hermeneutical framework.

divergence will lay the groundwork for rearticulating divine simplicity as love, a theme that will be central to my proposal in the next chapter.

PART I: DIVINE SIMPLICITY DEFENDED IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

In this section, I will focus on recent articulations of divine simplicity, examining how contemporary defenders engage with the classical tradition in light of its historical development. In their respective defenses of divine simplicity, each scholar analyzes a broad range of theological scholars; however, it is their unique interpretations of those sources that shows how the classical doctrine has been variously received in modernity. Thus, this section will prioritize current discussions over ancient debates. Specifically, I will explore the contributions of two modern thinkers who approach divine simplicity from different perspectives. First, David Bentley Hart, a staunch defender of classical theism, argues that denying divine simplicity equates to atheism, framing his defense primarily as a metaphysical account. Second, Paul R. Hinlicky offers a critique of "strong" claims associated with traditional simplicity, proposing a "weaker" version known as eschatological simplicity, which avoids metaphysical assertions about God in favor of a regulative approach. As modern representatives of diverse perspectives on simplicity, I will conclude each analysis with critiques relevant to this project.

Strong Simplicity: David Bentley Hart

What follows is a brief survey of David Bentley Hart's explication of divine simplicity, which, I acknowledge, may seem insufficient given the depth of his scholarship. Hart's work is characterized by unmatched rigor and confidence in his conclusions. While he has not produced a distinct resource solely dedicated to divine simplicity, his apologetic, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, and Bliss*, serves as a comprehensive exploration of the logical necessity of God as being itself, conscious mind, and the eternal bliss of perfect being. This text will be the centerpiece of my analysis, supplemented by other works that discuss how simplicity and freedom might be understood within a broader theological framework.

Divine Simplicity Defended

God is not *something else*; God is *no-thing*; God is *a pure nothingness*.[130] Though these phrases may not be the way one usually speaks of God, they help acclimate us to the metaphysics of classical theism. Hart, by his own reckoning, is in "slavish obedience"[131] to the entire classical theistic construct and understands divine simplicity as the central feature of its articulation. Simplicity is as undeniable to him as any brute fact, while also carrying the weight, as I have argued earlier, of the remaining three "derivative" doctrines of immutability, impassibility, and timelessness. What I have presented as problems, Hart defends as truths. In his defense of classical theism's claimants, he tries to orient the reader toward the apophatic grammar of classical theism by situating God beyond any contingent category:

> [To] think of God in our categories of existence "would be to reduce God to the level of the finite, making him simply a unit in the indefinite multiplicity of objects, distinct from them all, even as they are distinct from each other, or merging him in the totality of existence in a pantheism which will be practically indistinguishable from atheism."[132]

For Hart, the fundamental and ultimate question enjoined by thinking creatures is, "why is there something rather than nothing?"[133] His argument, drawing on historical thinkers like Aquinas, Gregory of Nyssa, Origen,[134] and a plethora of others, is simple and robust: the physical world is compositional, that is, composed of parts, and every composed thing, be it stars or humans, eventually breaks down to its constituent parts. Every composed thing de-composes. Additionally, logic proves that nothing within the

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[130] In order, Nicholas of Cusa, Plotinus, and Angelus Silesius. Hart, *The Experience of God*, 107.

[131] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 1. N.b. that this simple adumbration is in the third sentence on the first page.

[132] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 108, quoting from Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's *Indian Philosophy*. Hart is a self-professed syncretist (as opposed to a perennialist/pluralist) who draws from a wide range of thinkers, particularly those aligned with classical theism. While often labeled an Eastern Orthodox theologian, he is not tied to any specific tradition, especially when it is treated as an enclosed propositional system. See David Bently Hart, Perennialism vs. Syncretism - David Bentley Hart, August 25, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xD6Xl-ky2I.

[133] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 115.

[134] These three, emphasized by Hart, represent a doctrinal or 'baptized' simplicity (Aquinas), a metaphysical and logical simplicity linked to universalism (Gregory), and a protological simplicity (Origen). Maximus the Confessor has been excluded due to his less explicit universalism compared to Origen and Gregory.

created cosmos has the power to create itself. Therefore, to ask, "why is there something…or anything at all?" is to necessarily entreat the question of the Ultimate, i.e., God. Hart, without question, is a metaphysician. His argument in *The Experience of God* functions as an apologetic and is not intended (or interested) in defending Christianity per se; thus, he insists that every cogent religious system in human history, from first to last, finally arrives at the concept of a simple Being who is *being* itself.[135] This Being beyond beings (and beyond "being" itself) must, by logical necessity, be simple (as classically understood): non-composite, viz. not possessing distinct parts or properties that can de-compose, without distinction between essence and existence, and extra-categorical *esse* that is necessarily beyond all that is as both the source and sustainer of composed reality. [136]

Moreover, if God is metaphysically simple, as Hart understands it, then all other classical theistic categories must follow. If God is simple, then God is pure actuality without a predicated potentiality, meaning, God is timeless since time's arrow flows from the potential to the actual.[137] Similarly, the simple God is immutable since there is nothing *ad extra* or "external" to infinity: there is no-thing/no-force that can modify or modulate the God who has no parts. In Hart's words, "God is not like a physical object, composed of parts and defined by limits, and so is dependent upon nothing and subject to neither substantial change nor dissolution."[138] Similarly, God is impassible, that is without passions*:* unmodified, unmodifiable, and ontologically differentiated from anything that is not God.[139] From this decidedly classical articulation, Hart reasons that the simple God who is the source of all that is, is both the

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[135] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 127-128.

[136] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 128. See also 109: "He is instead the infinite to which nothing can add and from which nothing can subtract, and he himself is not some object in addition to other objects. He is the source and fullness of all being, the actuality in which all finite things live, move, and have their being, or in which all things hold together; and so he is also the reality that is present in all things as the very act of their existence. God, in short, is not a being but is at once 'beyond being'…"

[137] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 135.

[138] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 140.

[139] Hart, *The Experience of God*, 137-138.

beginning of all as it *should* be and, consequently, the end of all as it *will* be.[140] The end is in the beginning. Or said axiomatically: protology is eschatology.

Protological Eschatology and the Goodness of God

The thrust of Hart's understanding of protological eschatology is built upon the essential, undifferentiated, unmodulated, unchanging goodness of God. He maintains that the God that is Other and distinct from creation, freely chooses to create as an expression of ontological goodness.[141] Therefore, what God does (and intends) in creation is accomplished as an effulgent expression of God's own being: e.g., the creation narrative where God's six-fold pronouncement that "it is good" climaxes in the final moment when God surveyed the entirety of the creation and finally declared that "it is *very*[142] good" (Gen. 1:1-31). God's "first" acts within creation point to God's *esse* as Creator. What God declares good is because God *is* Good(ness); therefore, *all* that God does is good, since God is simply (i.e., without gradations of goodness or goodness as an attribute), essentially, and non-compositionally Good. *God is Goodness itself*. The protological creation that reveals the simple God through God's effulgent glory characterizes in part what God is in whole, thereby giving creation itself a teleological horizon of goodness: "Anything willingly done is done toward an end; and anything done toward an end is defined by that end."[143] God creates out of God's being: goodness. Additionally, since God's goodness is intrinsic to God's being, this suggests that God is never not creating.[144] Consequently, the eschaton will be fully

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[140] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 68-69.

[141] "[God's] freedom, moreover, can be understood as consisting not in some temporal act of decision that overcomes some prior state of indecision, but in the infinite liberty with which he manifests himself in the creation he wills from everlasting." Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 139. Also, "[The] good is an eternal reality, a transcendental truth that is ultimately identical with the very essence of God… The good is nothing less than God himself, in his aspect as the original source and ultimate end of all desire: that transcendent reality in which all things exist and in which the will has its highest fulfillment." Hart, *The Experience of God*, 253-254.

[142] מאד: "exceedingly, abundantly, even forcefully good." *BDB*, 547.

[143] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 68.

[144] E.g. Hart, *The Experience of God*, 67-68. "If God is the infinite and unconditioned source of all things, then his creative intention – whether he creates only one world, or many, or infinitely many – can be understood as an eternal act that involves no temporal change within him."

revealed in God's protological goodness because God cannot change. This suggests that God's protological declaration of the derivative "goodness" of creation instantiates the eschatological necessity of creation as well, since, according to Hart, the "absolute and contingent are morally indiscerptible."[145]

Already, we begin to see how Hart's soteriological universalism is eventuated in divine simplicity, viz. classical theism: what God creates as an expression of God's goodness cannot (ultimately or eventually) be anything less than what God intends for it to be. God is Goodness itself, and what God creates is derivatively (not intrinsically) good as an expression of God's own being. Or expressed formulaically: Good to good to Good. This forms the basis of Hart's eschatological vision of *eventual* universal salvation.

Divine Simplicity as Universalism/Eventualism

"God cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). While Hart is not loath to appeal to Scripture, it is not a series of prooftexts that finally lead him to the conclusion that the unknown eschaton will eventually and finally bring about the full restoration (Gk: *apokatastasis*, Acts 3:21) of all that *is*, to all as it *should* be – a kind of universalism. To be sure, his biblical fluency and exegetical prowess instantiate what he says has been a present and persistent quandary since his teenage years.[146] Additionally, as he developed a familiarity with the Church Fathers, he found that a type of universalism was present in some (certainly not all, or even most) of those early framers, especially in Gregory of Nyssa.[147] Yet, as formative and necessary as these influences were, Hart insists that any serious reflection upon the doctrine of divine simplicity will ultimately make it not only desirable and biblical, but also logical. [148] Our present

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[145] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 67-68.

[146] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 9-12.

[147] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 65-66.

[148] Regarding the biblical warrant for Hart's conclusions, see "Meditation 2" in *That All Shall Be Saved*, 92-129.

appraisal of Hart focuses on the philosophical merits of his metaphysics; therefore, it is the logic of his postulate that we consider, which proceeds as follows:[149]

God is simple. This means that God's goodness is not an attribute but the essence of God *in se*. God's simplicity insists that God is *actus purus*; therefore, *what* God does is not differentiated from *who* God is. When Goodness itself is expressed in the effulgence of creation, it too is good, because God cannot deny God's simple nature. However, creation's goodness is differentiated from God's essential Goodness: while God cannot deny Godself, humanity can freely choose that which denies Goodness and thereby pollute their lives as well as the creation in which they are to be the conditional *imago Dei,* stewarding, tending, cultivating, and subduing as co-creators. Yet even when the free choice is made to do that which is intentionally or ignorantly contrary to essential Goodness and creation's inherent goodness, the free-agent is pursuing what they deem is an immediate "good" for themselves, even if it is destructive. Indeed, even deviant actions of sinful transgression obtain for the person as a perceived good. That perceived good, however, is not subordinate to the essential Good; therefore, what is pursued as "good" is more appropriately a privation of Good and consequently a privation of God. When this path of perceived "goodness" (i.e. sin) is pursued, it unnaturally leads to death, since it disconnects the creature from the Creator who sustains *all things* by God's unconditioned being – life. Yet, God is infinite in essence, which means that there is no "outside" of God; thus, even in creaturely death, where perceived goodness (contra Absolute Goodness) has led the free agent, God may still be found. However, in this condition of death, the free agent continues to freely pursue their perceived good, which becomes a torment to them: hell. Additionally, the consuming fire of God's holiness – God's essential, undifferentiated, infinite being – is the fire of purgation that "burns" away all that does not reflect God's *esse*, that is, God's Goodness. But all free choices, freely chosen within creation, must come to an end, for nothing is infinite except God. Thus, whether the path of perceived goodness is freely followed to the end by exhausting *all* finite choices or whether the fires of purgation finally and fully remove and purify that which was pursued as

[149] In what follows, I will consolidate the entirety Hart's proposal from, *That All Shall Be Saved*. It is intended as one cohesive unit; therefore, it will not be interrupted by footnotes or paragraph breaks.

good but is realized as anti-Good i.e., anti-God, in the end, all that will remain is the Good that has always been since before there was a beginning. The Goodness of God that creates a good creation in the beginning is the essential Goodness that stands at the far horizon of time when all perceived goods have been exhausted; then (or finally, or eventually), the free-agents' pursuit of the perceived good will ultimately lead them to the final Good, who is the first Good.[150]

Therefore, I refer to this universalism as *eventualism.*[151] Eventually, says Hart, humanity's finite capacity for freely choosing/pursuing perceived goods contra the essential, simple Good, will be finally exhausted, as all finite realities are wont to do. And on that day, he insists, all that will remain is the protological and eschatological simple Goodness whereby "every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10, NASB). This eschatological promise is granted soteriological warrant in the Pauline prooftext that "if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9, NASB). But to this, I must ask: *is this not also a kind of determinism whereby God has already determined the ultimate end*? What of freedom? Hart responds to this question with a metaphorical shrug of the shoulders: "For those who worry that this all amounts to a kind of metaphysical determinism of the will, I may not be able to provide perfect comfort. Of course it is a kind of determinism…"[152] However, his proposal does not deny the freedom to choose; instead, it logically insists that all finite "options" must eventually come to an end. All finite possibilities, *freely chosen*, are penultimate to Infinite beatitude. Therefore, I conclude by exploring how Hart conceives of free will.

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[150] Hart's histophilotheological construal is presented in abstraction of – but not ignorance of – the dominant historical interpretation that has prevailed in Christian history as well as my own tradition.

[151] I have chosen this term as way of mitigating some of the irksome concepts associated with "universalism," especially the concept of a salvation without judgment. I would prefer to simply employ the Greek, *apokatastasis*, but have opted for "eventualism" knowing that Hart would not approve. This does not mean to imply an "eventuality" as in an inevitability, only that the pursuit of any "good" apart from God is eventually finite so that Christ, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6) will finally be seen and received as the only, eternal Good.

[152] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 178.

Freedom and Metaphysical Determinism

Freedom of the will or free will: this is the befouling and besetting perennial problem within classical theism and no less so with Hart. However, Hart's version of "determinism" is formed by an eschatological horizon that is spacious enough for freedoms that are finite but breathtakingly pluriform. His *eventualism* does not require a scripted determination of discrete historical events in which sin is ordained by God, natural disasters are "acts of God," and random events of chance are occulted within God. Of all the accounts of the various defenders of classical theism who have attempted to make sense of this muddle, Hart's is far and away the most cogent and unencumbered, with the greatest capacity for genuine freedom on offer. Indeed, in the question I posited above, Hart's own rejoinder, intentionally cut short, clarifies his own concession to a kind of determinism. He says, "Of course it is a kind of determinism, but only at the transcendental level, and only because rational volition must be determinate [teleological] to be anything at all."[153] He then further clarifies by discussing the rational will that inhabits the space between *desire* (i.e., the-origin-of-motion or sourcehood) and *desire's end*.[154]

This concept of freedom is profoundly different from most definitions of libertarian freedom[155] insofar as it insists that actual freedom must have a source of desire/will and an end/telos toward which the will/desire is oriented. In the interval between the desire and the will there is a substantive choice to be made: therefore, *desire*-choice-*telos* where *desire* freely obtains. This demonstrates that conceptually inferred within "freedom" is a kind of built-in "determinism" that is bi-directionally conditioned by both the source and the desired end.[156] Juxtapose this with a concept of freedom that says, in literalistic

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[153] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 178.

[154] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 178

[155] Libertarian freedom is first discussed in Chapter 2 but will be further explored below in the space dedicated to process theology.

[156] I will grant that we may not be able to make a hard distinction between desire and telos; however, I suspect that freedom in this frame is more about the alignment of desires with the true purpose or nature of the agent, which leads to authentic fulfillment and liberation from mere arbitrariness.

hyperbole, "anything goes" or "I can do whatever I want" or "I can be anything I desire." A *real* choice must inhabit the space of possibility that is situated between the source of desire, with its natural ability to act, and the telos of that desire. In this construal, that which freely obtains, does so because of the determined predicate *and* the final purpose, so that freedom is bounded (restricted) to the interval between protological/ontological grounding and the eschatological/teleological end. Therefore, for Hart, "Freedom is a relation to reality, which means liberty from delusion."[157] Said differently, I am *not* free to become twenty-five years old again, even though I may desire it, any more than I am free to become the cup of coffee sitting next to me. I may desire those things (I do not!), but there is no reality to those desires upon which to act. For Hart, the relationship between reality, ability, and the desired end is the realm in which genuine freedom abides or – if ignored or rendered moot by cognitive impairment or psychological dysphoria – results in a kind of slavery to desire without any reality. Thus he chides, "A fool might thrust his hand into the flame; only a lunatic would not then immediately withdraw it."[158] Therefore, in Hart's world, libertarian freedom is something of a lunacy, and actual freedom is the liberative power to enable the inherent reality of the causal agent to reify its fullest expression. So, an acorn is only "free" when it is freed to become an oak tree. Anything less is slavery. I am inclined to agree.[159]

Summary

I conclude with a proleptic note, anticipating further development in some of Hart's exposition on teleology, as this will form how I speak of freedom in the chapters to come. Additionally, what has been left unsaid here, vastly outweighs what has been said: namely, his irksome allegiance to the "derivative doctrinal dogmas" of classical theism's immutability, impassibility, and timelessness. I have intentionally set them aside so that I can utilize his voice as an erudite counter and balance to my own when I propose a

[157] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 178.

[158] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 178.

[159]In Chapter 2, I proposed teleological freedom – a similar proposal to Hart's – as an underdeveloped counterpoint to libertarian freedom. For a broader survey of Hart's interdisciplinary exploration of freedom, see *All Things Are Full of Gods: The Mysteries of Mind and Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), esp. 157-167.

cataphatic adumbration of simplicity and its attending dogmas. For now, we will content ourselves with a quick glance behind us in our survey of Hart's appraisal of classical theism's account of divine simplicity. His is a strong, classical defense that relies heavily upon the historical tradition and analytic logic in order to offer his apologetic for God as the ultimate Good. Additionally, his classical ruminations as well as interdisciplinary approach to theism brought him to *his* logical conclusion of a universal salvation that we've termed *eventualism.* Finally, Hart's *eventualism* raised the question about a determined teleology which invoked Hart's invective on freedom. As a classical theist, there is no better articulator and defender of the historical "strong" simplicity of classical theism. We now turn to another defender of simplicity whose own position stands as counterpoint to Hart's.

Weak Simplicity: Paul R. Hinlicky

Lutheran theologian Paul R. Hinlicky, proffers a middle way between the stark apophaticism of metaphysical simplicity – what he terms "protological" simplicity – and the bevy of scholars in multiple disciplines who have rejected divine simplicity in toto. In Hinlicky's version, God is immutably simple *and* is relationally "becoming" what God truly (and already) is within creation. In fact, his version reverses the priority so that what God is relationally is prioritized over what God is essentially. Hinlicky's provocative *via media* establishes the canonical tradition as the primary and true revelation of God as God.[160] As such, it avoids the pitfalls endemic to classical theism, where divine and creaturely freedom must be arduously reconciled with its philosophical claims. In his schema, God is free to act (or not) without necessitated compulsion or even as an eventuality. Instead, Hinlicky begins his ascent to the divine through the freely enacted divine descent into creation as revealed in Scripture. The God of Scripture contra the God of philosophy (i.e., classical theism) is relationally revealed in the kerygmatic proclamation of trinitarian perichoresis. The consequence is what he calls the "rule of speech" wherein

[160] By "canonical," Hinlicky means the final form of the biblical text. Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity: Christ the Crisis of Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016), 204.

God *becomes* what God *is* through relational participation, revealed especially in the first table of the Decalogue:

> [So] speak of God that God becomes the one God (that God the Holy Trinity is) for you, as indeed the One of all the so-called gods in heaven and on earth who freely comes to set free the captive from whatever captivity keeps one from loving this liberating God above all and all other creatures as those also to be set free.[161]

This statement from Hinlicky's last chapter functions as a distilled conclusion – a command, actually[162] – to his proposal, where the "rule of speech" (i.e., "So speak of God…") actualizes *how* God becomes the God revealed in Scripture *to us*. He localizes his claim within the context of Israel's central narrative of liberation from Egypt, especially centered at Sinai, where the covenantal Decalogue is delivered to Israel. The Sinai theophany functions as the grammatical archetype for cataphatically knowing God. Specifically, it narrates the story of God's liberating redemption of Israel from their slavery, which is then recapitulated throughout salvation history and finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Thus, Hinlicky makes his central claim: that God becomes humanity's redeemer, thereby revealing that the divine *esse* is divine redeemer; God is Redeemer.[163] Committed to the canonical tradition as fundamentally authoritative in its declarative force, Hinlicky insists that Scripture truly reveals God (or reveals God truly). In this way, God became for Israel what God truly is.

This redemptive claim that, for Hinlicky, reveals essential divinity is actualized in the first command: "You shall have no other gods *before my face* [עַל־פָּנַי]" (Ex. 20:3). To this, he adds that this was not a monotheistic declaration or a command to be or become monotheists per se. Instead, it is a henotheistic claim that gave YHWH ultimate priority over any other gods. Yet, by the time of the exile,

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[161] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 208-209.

[162] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 208-209.

[163] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 205. Also 6-7: "[The] incomparability of God is predicated on His self-identification as the redeemer of Israel… What makes God one [simple] within [the] biblical framework is His Word, which in His Spirit returns to Him not in vain (Isa. 55:11), an exclusive claim to save." These references demonstrate the redemptive theme present throughout. While other themes in Hinlicky's work also hold priority, my focus on a cataphatic grammar makes his use of "redeemer" particularly relevant.

the grammar of the canonical kerygmatic tradition had progressively and subtly morphed and was nearing an epistemic monotheism contra their early henotheistic cosmology.[164] This belies a subtlety that undergirds a major point in Hinlicky, namely that the kerygmatic command was "constitutive to the covenantal tradition from the outset."[165] That is, in its declaration (revelation) and in its adherence (regulation), the God among gods *became* the only God to Israel. God became what God is through divine revelation and human participation. To this point, Hinlicky cites Martin Luther, saying,

> It is only that through a particular rite and worship [Moses] determined to have none but the Lord as God. Thus God becomes God and changes in accordance with the change in our feelings toward Him…no one can have one God unless he clings to Him alone and trusts in Him alone.[166]

While Luther was hermeneutically beholden to classical theism's propositions,[167] this Lutheran scholar finds in him a theological grammar that he adopts and adapts as his own: God *becoming* God,[168] where God's becoming to the creature is deployed grammatically, prioritizing how God reveals Godself: thus, God becomes (*actus*) the redeemer (cataphasis) that God is (simple). The "becoming" grammar implies a kind of divine mutability;[169] the "redemptive" grammar, a positivistic divine epistemology; the "is-ness" grammar, a semi-classical ontology. This means that what the Bible seems to reveal as a complex of divine intra-relationality within God is essentially true of God via God's inter-relationality within creation: e.g., "I am no longer in the world; and *yet* they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We *are*" (Jn. 17:11, NASB). Therefore, God is known truly as redeemer because God has freely revealed Godself to creation as such. To this, Hinlicky insists that canonical authority is the way in which

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[164] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 206. Here, Hinlicky draws on Brevard Child's exegesis.

[165] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 206.

[166] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 208.

[167] In fact, Hinlicky doesn't even shy away from charging Luther "in some moods" with the same modalism that he claims is implied in Western accounts of trinitarian formulae. Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 117.

[168] A second-order theological dialectic that qualifies a first-order proposition. Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 202-203.

[169] I prefer adaptability.

God is revealed and that nomian participation in that revelation is the *taxis* of God's becoming to us what God is. However, his emphasis upon nomian participation does not imply that God's becoming is funded by Israel's obedience or disobedience. Israel received the tables of the Law after God had brought them out of Egypt, demonstrating that God had already been revealed as redeemer. Instead, regulatory adherence to the law is the *taxis* of God's becoming to Israel. God's becoming, then, is not God's becoming something else, or something new, or something more; instead, it is God's becoming *for* creation (*pro nobis*)[170] what God is *to* creation (*ad nos*). He asserts that God is known truly as redeemer because God has freely revealed Godself to creation as such.

It is precisely at this point that Hinlicky's approach diverges from the classical tradition. Classical theism begins with a philosophical proposition that functions as a hermeneutical prejudice. Consider a thought experiment: imagine a person who approaches Scripture with minimal hermeneutical biases – acknowledging, of course, that such a scenario is purely hypothetical. Even in this imaginative exercise, the divine vision revealed through their reading might present a deity characterized by complexity and relational dynamics, rather than the protologically simple deity of Hinlicky's proposal. To be sure, there are contextually bound verses that speak of God being unchanging: e.g., "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).[171] However, the comparatively infrequent references to those divine attributes that we would normally cite in defense of classical theistic simplicity would be interpreted within the context of a canonical narrative that reveals a deeply complex God who seems to change and adapt to an unfolding drama. Hinlicky does not propose this hypothetical scenario; however, it helps us feel the force of his critique of classical theism. Simply stated, on the face of it, Scripture does not reveal a classically simple God, and Hinlicky is resolute: the canon must be allowed to function authoritatively. As such, simplicity (et al.) must be understood through the lens of Scripture rather than

[170] Cf. Bruce McCormack's use of *pro nobis* in the previous chapter.

[171] Notice, though, that even here, the referent is Jesus Christ who cannot be said to be unchanging the same way in which we speak of God as simple. Cf., "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Lk. 2:52, NASB).

the other way around. In Hinlicky's methodology, Rahner's Rule is solidified in the epistemological priority of knowing God as God is by knowing God as God is revealed; therefore, the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and not vice versa. It is not surprising that his trinitarian approach, prioritizing God's revealed economy, is dependent upon a Cappadocian articulation.

Trinity as Actus: Essential Perichoresis

Hinlicky's central critique of the classical definition of simplicity is similarly unsurprising. Critiquing its philosophical roots, he echoes a criticism that has become predictable, accusing the classicist of idolizing the Platonized psychological Trinity of *thought thinking and willing itself*. Thus, he infers that when this ineffable Idea functions as the foundation for conceiving God (or better, conceptualizing God's inconceivability), then God's own refractive *actus* is little more than a return to "primal unity," with all the inherent problems that this generates: e.g., trinitarianism that is functionally tri-theistic; inherent determinism since the unchanging God returns to God; consequently, epiphenomenal freedom.[172] This Platonic "idea" that transcends knowledge and our ability to "know" God – that is, to be able to "so speak of God that God becomes the one God for you" – must bow before the revealed God of perichoretic becoming *within* creation. The inverse of this suggests that the revealed God is no more than a dim reflection of an ontological whole – what Hinlicky condemns as an Augustinian modalism (and quaternity![173]): a tri-unity devoid of a teleological becoming (as in an eternally unfolding "new creation") and instead conceived as an eternal regression of tri-personality into ontological obscurity. This Platonized philosophical deity of the mind is merely an idea to which he quips, "the idea is but the idol

[172] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 41.

[173] Quoting at length, "The absolute-relative distinction in language for God that Augustine devises to parse substantial and personal attributions of God respectively inevitably suggests that God is God for God absolutely, indivisibly, but God for us appears as the Three, relatively. That precisely would be modalism, in which God in His essential reality is something infinitely other than God in His historical self-revelation as the Three of the gospel narrative. The one divine nature thus reified, it is now inevitably thought of as a foundational fourth, the One, over against the Three, and so we come to the de facto quaternity of Western modalism." Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 105.

made by the mind."[174] This is the impetus for his prioritizing the revealed economy of God as cataphatically informing how we approach the metaphysical God.

The implication of this epistemological reprioritization is a strong Christological claim where Christ's condescension in the person of Jesus includes humanity within the perichoretic life of the "simple" unity of divine relationality. In Christ, humanity – through God's redeeming and liberating work, Eucharistic encounter, and regulative fidelity – is situationally present to the Father through the Spirit (e.g., Eph. 2:4-6). The trinitarian *actus* of the divine life (Hinlicky's "Beloved Community") is realized in the life of the world through the mediatorial revelation of God-as-Redeemer: "I am THE ONE WHO IS, your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Ex. 20:1, Hinlicky's translation). This serves to reinforce his central claim: if the divine name is inexorably linked to God's being and to God's action, then we cannot ignore the biblical witness of divine self-predication as essentially substantive of the divine life *in se*. To do otherwise, Hinlicky insists, is to replace the God revealed through God's *actus* within creation with "gross 'ontotheological' idols [and] also with a subtle, abstract, and highly refined 'One.'"[175] Obviously a pejorative.

Instead, his allegiance to a Cappadocian tri-personhood of the Godhead renders to each a decisive and distinct distribution of "the [mutually qualifying] divine perfections" as a way of comprehending God's oneness.[176] First, the Father is "assigned all possibilities."[177] To the classicist, even the possibility of possibility in God is anathema, as this would imply that there is something lacking in God. Yet for Hinlicky, God's freedom for and toward creation requires the risk of God's own unity! However, the risk inherent in possibility is met with the perfect power of the Father to address *all risks* with *all power*. For

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[174] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 207.

[175] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 157-158.

[176] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 178. Hinlicky's perichoretic articulation is defended in his own defense of the Régnon thesis. See 24-26.

[177] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 178.

Hinlicky, omni-power is not the result of an abstract ideal that is philosophically called God; it is the freedom of possibility (along with the compossible risks implied in possibility) that is summarily met with omni-sufficiency. Hinlicky posits, "[The] unity of the Triune God is lived, risked, jeopardized for us, and so also, if the promise vouchsafed in the resurrection proves true, triumphant for us and for all."[178]

Second, by virtue of Jesus Christ's vindication in the resurrection, the Son is assigned "the wisdom that saves the world from its own wisdom by the folly of the cross."[179] It is in the hypostasis of the Word made flesh that humanity, as it is, is inhered within God, and where the "rule of speech" that predicates God's becoming is perfectly fulfilled: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Mt. 3:17, NASB). Humanity's "wisdom" – philosophical apophaticism – has concluded that God cannot not be spoken of, thereby perennially separating the creature from the Creator; but in Christ, the wisdom of humanity was crucified in the flesh so that we could pray with Christ, "*Our* Father…" Or, in the Pauline echo of Jesus' Gethsemane prayer, "you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" (Mk. 14:36; Rom. 8:15, NASB).

Lastly, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, is the way in which we "know" God. Therefore, the "spirit of adoption" of which Paul speaks is the unitive perfection of perfect "love that qualifies power with wisdom and wisdom with power to the Spirit, who unites the Son and the Father."[180] As such, what unites the Father to the Son is constitutive of what unites humanity – hypostatically inhered in Christ – to the Father. "And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (Jn. 20:22, NASB).

Hinlicky's weak simplicity, consequently, relies fully upon the personhood of the revealed God of Scripture. Specifically, God is known as God has been revealed within the salvation history of the

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[178] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 178.

[179] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 178.

[180] Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, 178.

Christ event. In Christ, God becomes *for us* the singular (simple) God who redeems, so that redemption is not just what God does, it is who God is: Redeemer. Power is united to wisdom in the love of the Spirit, so that God's simplicity is revealed in the singular work of God *pro nobis*. To this, he concluded with a summary statement: "So there is a fit between eternal becoming and the temporal coming of God, which is not compulsory in any way but a free act of love, as of God surpassing God to overcome righteous wrath and find mercy for sinful people."[181]

Summary

Hinlicky's weak simplicity is (as the tired old joke goes) not simple. In his reappraisal of the doctrine, he demonstrates a lifetime of scholarly insight and familiarity with the rigor of theological history. I dare not question his acumen. Yet, I wonder, in regard to his chosen theological grammar, is the cataphatic articulation of God's simplicity best conveyed in the revelation of God as "redeemer"? I ask because I too will be proffering a cataphatic articulation of simplicity; thus, the rationale for specifying one term over another is important. I maintain (and will attempt to prove) that canonical authority cataphatically insists that "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:16) and that this is what defines divine simplicity, perhaps even "weakening" its classical derivative claims. "God is love" seems obvious to me. Yet, Hinlicky lands upon the grammar of redeemer, which probably seems equally obvious to him. Additionally, I wonder if this positivistic claim to God's actuality – or God's actualizing Godself within creation as redeemer—might suggest a necessity of sin within creation, insofar as God is revealed as God is. Where there is a need for a redeemer, there is a need for redemption. Clearly, this is warranted by both the canonical witness as well as personal and historical experience. Yet, if this is functionally and essentially who God is to us – and therefore who God is *in se* – then the cataphatic grammar of "redeemer" suggests that God cannot be the redeemer unless there is something to redeem. Or, as Hart, the metaphysician, insists:

> [This] means that, as the pathos of finite existence constitutes God as God, sin, suffering, and death are the horizon God has elected along with his own identity in Christ, for God's redemptive

[181] Paul R. Hinlicky, email message, November 29, 2022.

> actions are not simply gracious, but definitive of his nature, and so evil is present in creation as the shadow accompanying God's decision to be this God and not another. [182]

However, even with this cautious critique, there is a grammatical congruency between Hinlicky's weak simplicity and my own forthcoming proposal. His cataphatic insistence gives credence and impetus to the conviction that we share: that God can be known as God is even though God cannot be fully comprehended. He says it this way (beautifully, I might add),

> [Divine] mystery…can never be comprehended but can be described and thus recognizable by the mind of creatures. Such mysteries are the person of Christ and the being of the triune God and derivatively of the real presence of Jesus Christ in word and sacrament by the power of the Holy Spirit.[183]

Yet, there are differences that remain. In anticipation of my own proposal, I offer here a constitutive difference: Hinlicky's hermeneutic is functionally Scriptural; however, I would suggest that it is *not* canonical. This difference is primarily a definitional one. I am inclined toward a broader understanding of "canon," especially as it is articulated by William J. Abraham et al. in their presentation of *Canonical Theism*.[184] This broader appraisal is not only concerned with the final form of the Bible as solely authoritative (as in *sola Scriptura*) but also conceives canonical authority as an interpretive framework, particularly employing the (so-called) Wesleyan quadrilateral. As such, the canonical impetus would rightly include the philosophical grammar that Hinlicky eschews. More on this later.

For our present purposes, two defenders of divine simplicity have been presented who each offer vastly different accounts. This demonstrates that within the doctrine, there is anything but univocity. Hart, the committed metaphysician, was tempered by Hinlicky, the theologian; Hinlicky's biblicism, in turn, was challenged by Hart's philosophy. These two stand as exemplars within the field of simplicity champions. However, while divine simplicity has been a (nearly) universally assumed doctrine

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[182] David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 50.

[183] Paul R. Hinlicky, email message, November 29, 2022.

[184] William J. Abraham, ed., *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ, 2008).

throughout theistic history, in recent years it has suffered an exodus of its own, as many classical theists have been unable to reconcile its radical claims and have summarily abandoned the doctrine altogether. We turn now to some of those contenders.

PART II: DETERMINISM AND DIVINE SIMPLICITY REJECTED

As we move into Part II, this section will focus specifically on critiques of divine simplicity that have emerged from process theologians who refer to themselves as Neoclassicists. While many scholars and non-specialists continue to uphold divine simplicity, asserting its coherence and scriptural alignment, a significant faction argues that it represents an antiquated and logically flawed position. Among those who categorically reject the doctrine are process theologians, whose philosophical foundations reflect classical theism's own roots in pre-Christian philosophy. This section will survey process theology by emphasizing aspects that directly engage with classical theism's articulation of divine simplicity and its implications for freedom. We will trace the historical evolution of process thought, spotlighting contemporary theologians who challenge classical paradigms. While process theology has adeptly highlighted the inherent issues within classical simplicity, its outright rejection of classicism leads to radical assertions that merit rigorous critique. Consequently, the tone of this survey will, at times, be polemical, as I contend that process theology is not *Neo*classical but is more aptly described as *anti*-classical.

Process Theology: The Becoming God

As a distinctly modern theo-philosophical development based on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, process theology has experienced a recent explosion of growth that is both broadly explored and notoriously ambiguous in its articulations. One might suggest that to name it a theo-philosophy is to invert the order of priority in its development, opting instead for the more appropriate designation of philo-theology. In this section, we will examine its development from Whitehead's philosophy to (and through) its modern inheritors. Three names provide the pedagogical provenance that brings it into modern academic and theological discourse: Charles Hartshorne, a student and assistant to Whitehead; John Cobb, who was a student of Hartshorne; and David Ray Griffin, who was also a student and

collaborator of Hartshorne. Necessary to our discussion is its inherited status through Thomas Jay Oord, whose doctoral advisor was David Ray Griffin. For our purposes, I will explore the Whiteheadian concepts of process thought as mediated through these recent inheritors, specifically regarding Tom Oord's *Open and Relational Theology*. We will then consider some of the challenges that process theology, encounters in its attempts to counter classical theism's claims, especially as they relate to creaturely freedom and determinism.

Whitehead (1861-1947): God as Creativity

It has become paradigmatic to condense Whitehead's metaphysics into a single quote. I, likewise, will succumb to the oversimplistic reduction of his complex thought: "It is as true to say that God creates the World as that the World creates God."[185] For Whitehead, the problem of a modal collapse between God's aseity and creation's contingency is resolved by allowing the collapse so that God's being is not only relationally connected to creation but is also dependent upon it. Ronald Nash leaves little room for ambiguity when he states of Whiteheadian conceptions, "Process theology denies God's independence of the world."[186] This is significant to our present inquiry into classical theism, as Whitehead's philosophy recognizes the endemic problems in classical articulations, namely that classicism "creates" a God devoid of freedom, thereby denying any real freedom in the contingent, as demonstrated above. The Whiteheadian solution was to deny God metaphysical distinction from creation. One of the consequences, as happily acknowledged in process theology, is a denial of *creatio ex nihilo,*[187] giving metaphysical ontological status to creation, understood as the material body (corporeal contingent) of the spirited Mind

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[185] Alfred North Whitehead, David Ray Griffin, and Donald W. Sherburne, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Gifford Lectures 1927–28 (New York: Free Press, 1978), 348.

[186] Ronald H. Nash, "Process Theology and Classical Theism," in *On Process Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 15.

[187] E.g., "Only if God may not in the classical metaphysical sense be understood as omnipotent creator (*ex nihilo*) does it become possible to withstand the devastating effects of the question of theodicy." Roland Faber, *The Becoming of God: Process Theology, Philosophy, and Multireligious Engagement* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017), 181. See also from Oord's blog post: "I believe God created the heavens, the earth, and every living thing. But I think Christians should reject the idea that God created the universe from absolutely nothing." He proffers his own rearticulation of *creatio ex nihilo* with a revised *creatio ex creare en amore*. Oord, "Creatio ex Nihilo."

(immaterial creator): e.g., "God can be thought of as in the world much in the same way a mind is in a body."[188] Therefore, God is not to be understood essentially as a being or even as being itself, but rather as creativity: "In the philosophy of organism, this ultimate is termed 'creativity'; and God is its primordial, non-temporal accident." In a real sense, God's "non-temporal accidents," then, are essential to God per se; that is, external causation is eternally giving shape to and forming God. Or, in Whitehead's words, "…'becoming' is a creative advance into novelty."[189] God, then, is a "becoming" God who is both dependent upon creation for God's own substance and continually redefined by creation's own transitory processes.

Hartshorne's (1897-2000) Di-polarity

Charles Hartshorne advanced Whitehead's protological philosophy while addressing key issues in Whitehead's thinking. Notably, he argued that if God is equated with "creativity," then creativity becomes the ultimate reality rather than God.[190] Hartshorne personalizes Whitehead's impersonal creative force by defining God as a living person, similar to how one understands creatures: as a living community or a "monarchial society" with interrelated strata.[191] This dipolar view of the divine – mind and body in mutual interdependence – contrasts sharply with classical theism's monopolar perspective, where God is seen as *ipsum esse subsistens*. For Hartshorne, as for Whitehead, creation is essential to God's existence; God cannot exist apart from the world any more than the world can exist apart from God, forming an eternal cosmogony rather than a discrete creative moment. As William Lane Craig notes, this radical view prevents us from claiming the universe is eternally generated or created. Instead, since God is an eternally

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[188] Nash, "Process Theology and Classical Theism," 15. Or as Charles Hartshorne restated it, "The world consists of individuals, but the totality of individuals as a physical or spatial whole is God's body, the Soul of which is God." Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 94.

[189] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 28. It is significant to note the difference between the "becoming" that is foundational to process theology and Hinlicky's usage of "becoming." In process thought, God's becoming is formational and bears ontological significance so that God changes (mutability) from what God has been to something that is metaphysically more than what God has been.

[190] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 177.

[191] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 177.

embodied person, "God does not cause the universe to exist any more than one's mind causes one's body to exist: the universe influences and is influenced by its cosmic mind, *but it is not created by it*."[192] In light of Whitehead's becoming God, Hartshorne rejects the notion of a non-existent created order, proposing that while this universe may not have always existed, countless discrete universes could have led to this one, allowing both the cosmos and God to evolve together.[193] If God has always existed, so too has the universe, implying God exists in a state of continual growth in perfection, fundamentally rejecting any idea of divine simplicity in favor of a dynamic, growing God.

Cobb (1925-present) and Griffin (1939-2022): Toward a Process Theology

John Cobb and David Ray Griffin are discussed together here due to their collaborative efforts in articulating process theology from its philosophical origins.[194] This transition underscores that process theology is not *neo*-classical; rather, it outright rejects classical articulations, making it *anti*-classical. For instance, Griffin distinguishes process theology from open theism by characterizing the latter as "classical free-will theism," thus reinforcing the divide between process theology and classicism.[195] Cobb and Griffin outline five key distinctions: 1) God as Cosmic Moralist; 2) God as Unchanging and Passionless Absolute; 3) God as Controlling Power; 4) God as Sanctioner of the Status Quo; 5) God as Male.[196] While each point warrants discussion, I will focus on artifacts 2 and 3, which relate directly to the present concerns regarding classical theism.

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[192] William Lane Craig, "Creatio ex Nihilo," in *On Process Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 146.

[193] Craig, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 147.

[194] John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exploration* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1976).

[195] John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 192. Quoting from Cobb and Pinnock's, *Searching for an Adequate God*, 10-14. Note: the word that stands between "classical" and "theism" is "free-will." This establishes that central to process theology is the matter of freedom (free will): that is, how do we reconcile the God of tradition against the lived-out and lived-in world?

[196] Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology,* 8–10.

Artifact 2 critiques divine immutability and impassibility as classically articulated, arguing that such formulations deny God the radical relationality central to process theology.[197] If God is unchanging, genuine relatedness to the world is impossible. Rooted in Whiteheadian philosophy, process theology posits that God and the world mutually influence each other, necessitating mutual mutability. This challenges the classical problem of determinism, which I previously termed a non sequitur. For real freedom – contrary to conceptual freedom – God must engage in risky choices that impact both partners in a relationship. I provisionally agree that God is both passionate and adaptive, points that will be addressed in the next chapter. In process thought, God and creation are always in flux, affected by real passions, moving into a potential future that is not predetermined. This perspective is worth exploring, particularly when considering Scripture, which depicts a passionate, adaptable God.

Artifact 3 builds on this notion. Process theologians view God not as a determining cause but as a persuasive partner in the transition from potential to actual. Griffin's "hardcore commonsense" view of freedom asserts that divine and contingent freedoms are not merely epiphenomenal.[198] However, his argument relies on a softer interpretation of commonsense intuition as the basis for a "hardcore" proposition. Process constructs typically start with observable phenomena and inductively derive assertions about reality. Consequently, Griffin's view of divine freedom arises from anthropomorphic intuition that achieves epistemological certainty. For Cobb and Griffin, this means God does not exert controlling omnipotence; God cannot violate the intuition of freedom, as this intuition reflects the

[197] It might also be argued that "Absolute" is meant to convey a sense of timelessness, thereby addressing each of the derivative dogmas of simplicity while actively denying the *prima dogma* itself.

[198] David Ray Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot: Consciousness, Freedom, and the Mind-Body Problem* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 15-21, 163-166. For Griffin, a soft commonsense proposition would be something like, "the material world is solid" since that can be experienced commonly and becomes constitutive of how we interact with it. Yet science has shown that the material world is mostly composed of space between particles held in place by natural forces, i.e., electromagnetism. A truer proposition would be that "the world is mostly space"; yet "common-sense" interaction requires us to interact with it as solid. So, the hardcore commonsense notion is that the material world is mostly not solid even though our soft interaction suggests otherwise. He classifies "freedom" under the category of hardcore commonsense, in a "not-to-be-denied" sense but is also reinforced in the soft sense of behavior that acts as if there is actual libertarian freedom.

transcendent truth of divine freedom.[199] Thus, there is no need for God to interact with the world in miraculous ways that override creaturely freedom. God freely persuades creation toward objective good but is dependent upon creation's participation to move toward that which is good. Or not. Freedom, thus, is given ontological priority in process theology. Within process thought, this concept of freedom forms the basis for conceptually understanding what love is. "If we truly love others we do not seek to control them."[200] It is this concept of love that has motivated many of the voices that are presently advancing process theology, to which we now turn.

Our exploration of process theology has revealed core articulations currently being developed within the discipline. From its philosophical roots to theological implications, process thought establishes a philo-theological system where the material world is essential to God, akin to how a body is necessary to a mind. This suggests that God (as non-corporeal mind/creativity) is not merely affected by the cosmos but is fundamentally defined by it. God cannot exist without the material world, just as the world cannot exist without God. Consequently, while God can influence the cosmos, divine power cannot override its natural freedoms. This position denies coercive love, posing challenges to the classical system and presenting a complex God characterized by increasing complexity, negating any knowledge of what either God or creation is becoming. Ultimately, process theology is anti-classical, centered on a divine, non-coercive love. Here, I propose that divine simplicity might be positively defined by love, a notion explored further through the work of Oord, who has dedicated his life to understanding this God of love.

Oord (1965-present): The Uncontrolling Love of God

Thomas J. Oord's process theology is widely accessible through his numerous writings that revolve around a central theme: love.[201] In his most concise and scholarly expression and development of

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[199] Cooper, *Panentheism*, 187.

[200] Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 187.

[201] For example: *Science of Love: The Wisdom of Well-Being*; *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love*; *The Many Facets of Love: Philosophical Perspectives*; *The Nature of Love: A Theology*; *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement*; *Pluriform Love: An Open and Relational Theology of Well-Being*.

"Open and Relational" theology, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* he examines freedom in the Creator and creation, addressing randomness, evil, and providence while introducing the idea of "essential kenosis."[202] Additionally, it forms the basis as well as much of the definitional content of his cataphatic proposal where he insists, "God is love." In this regard, there is similarity between his work and my own proposal where I will make the same cataphatic claim; however, our definitions diverge significantly, leading to different conclusions. This section will explore the development of his definition viz. process theology, starting with the problem of tragedy and theodicy, then analyzing his view of freedom in the context of good and evil, and concluding with his conception of divine love and essential kenosis. Throughout, I will highlight how Oord's insights speak credibly to the reality of life while simultaneously revealing theological inconsistencies endemic to process theology. Specific to our inquiry, my own response will explicitly reject the notion of libertarian freedom and offer in its place a rearticulated teleological freedom.

Theodicy and Randomness: When God Won't

Oord begins his theological exploration by grappling with the question: how can an all-powerful, good God permit unjust suffering? The reality of non-retributive suffering lies at the core of his work.[203] He critiques classical theism for claiming that events occur by divine fiat or permissive will, presenting a troubling case study on classical theology's implications. Regardless of whether we claim that evil's occurrence in the world is divinely ordained or permissively allowed, both portray God as the *prima causa*. He argues against classical theism by insisting that God's classical omni-characteristics should compel divine action. If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, then God is aware of the suffering, able to do something about it, and immediately accessible to it. Therefore, he wonders why God fails to act in instances when evil seems to prevail. He argues that the classical response suggests either

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[202] Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 10.

[203] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*. See especially chapters 1 and 2.

that God's plans are too mysterious for us to understand, leading us to accept that any evil must be necessary to God's plans, or that God passively allows it, thereby making God complicit in evil while claiming moral absolution.[204] Always provocative, he says it more starkly against the God of classical theism, "The God who allows evil is guilty."[205]

> If God can control evildoers, we should blame God for allowing the atrocities they commit. The God who fails to prevent preventable genuine evil is morally reprehensible. The God capable of control is at least partly to blame for the evils we've endured. He could have stopped them singlehandedly.[206]

This theodicean dilemma is Oord's primary motivation behind much of his defense and evangelistic zeal for process theology. In the end, he surmises that we are left with two options: we either accept the classical God and concede to the determinism it implies or abandon classicism (and the classical God) entirely. He has taken the latter view. Consequently, his understanding of *real* freedom in view of a world where good and evil inhere coterminously must account for those moments of apparent divine non-participation.

Freedom in a World of Good and Evil: Why God Can't

The question of freedom within classical theism is pivotal to process theology's critique. In his book *God Can't*, Oord addresses these concerns, particularly the limitations posed by the apophatic omni-language. He argues that God's inability to act is not due to a deficiency in divine power but stems from the primacy of divine love: God is love. Thus, when a loving response would mitigate suffering and God refrains from intervening, it is not due to hidden agendas or a sovereign "plan"; rather, it is because God's essence makes such intervention impossible. Just as God's power cannot perform logically incoherent acts – things like creating a round square, a married bachelor, or an appetizing quiche[207] – Oord asserts that

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[204] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 19-20.

[205] Thomas Jay Oord, *God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, or Other Evils* (Grasmere: SacraSage, 2019), 19.

[206] Oord, *God Can't*, 19.

[207] The latter category is, *perhaps,* debatable, though I doubt it.

essential love constrains God from overriding creaturely freedom. While God desires to eliminate evil, the very nature of love necessitates the allowance of individual freedom, rendering such intervention impossible. To support this assertion, he cites a series of biblical prooftexts: "God cannot lie" (Titus 1:2); "God cannot be tempted" (James 1:13); "God cannot grow weary" (Isaiah 40:28).

However, this delimitation of God falls prey to the covert cataphasis mentioned in Chapter 2, *especially* in how it utilizes Scripture. The scriptural claims are properly apophatic insofar as they demonstrate that God cannot be defined by our creaturely categories; it would be logically incoherent to speak of God – i.e., Truth – as lying. It is not that God is incapable of lying in the sense of George Washington's apocryphal confession, "I cannot tell a lie," but rather that God cannot be or do that which is not God, any more than light can be dark. Yet Oord employs these verses in precisely that way, collapsing their meaning into a creaturely inability to do (or not do) something. This shift moves the focus from the apophatic inability of creation to define God toward a definition of God as an exalted but limited being characterized by divine incapacity. Responding to this cataphatic slippage in principle, though not explicitly, Robert Cornwall, a contributor to Oord's edited volumes, writes about Oord's book *The Death of Omnipotence and Birth of Amipotence* that his "portrayal of God has become so restricted that it appears God can't do very much."[208]

In fairness to his thesis, Oord emphasizes that God's inability is not an external constraint imposed by that which is not God. Instead, in developing his view of essential kenosis, he assumes the primacy of kenotic love as "logically primary in God's eternal essence."[209] Essential kenosis posits that God's love is a necessary and eternal attribute of God's nature. Thus, Oord claims that the non-coercive love inherent in God limits God's power to act within creation. He clarifies:

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[208] Robert Cornwall, "The Death of Omnipotence and the Birth of Amipotence (Thomas Jay Oord) - Review," Ponderings On A Faith Journey (blog), May 4, 2023, https://www.bobcornwall.com/2023/05/the-death-of-omnipotence-and-birth-of.html.

[209] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 160-161.

> It's important to recognize that *I* am not placing limits on God. Rather, God's loving nature determines, shapes, or governs what God can do. External powers, natural laws, or Satan do not essentially limit God. Constraints on God's power do not come from outside.[210]

Neither is God's inability self-imposed, as that would imply that God is choosing what to do or not do, thereby making God an arbitrary and vindictive deity.[211] Instead, according to Oord, God's nature renders God incapable (covert cataphasis), thereby explaining why evil persists: God simply can't.

As we consider Oord's conception of divine love and its implications for God's power, we must also grapple with the broader implications for human agency and freedom within classical theism. Oord's argument posits that God's essential nature – rooted in love – limits divine action, raising crucial questions about the interplay between divine sovereignty and human freedom. This tension invites a deeper exploration of libertarian freedom, emphasizing the capacity of individuals to make choices that shape their moral landscape. In this context, we must examine how libertarian freedom aligns or conflicts with the notion of a God who, in Oord's view, cannot intervene without compromising the very love by which God is defined. Thus, the dialogue surrounding divine capability and human agency becomes pivotal in understanding how good and evil coexist in a world governed by a loving God. Ultimately, this inquiry leads us to the concept of libertarian freedom as understood by Oord.

Libertarian Freedom

Libertarian freedom, as articulated by Oord, posits that individuals are the source of their own desires, enabling them to freely choose among genuine options. This "free will" shapes decisions and generates indeterminate effects in the world, contributing to an open future. In contrast to compatibilism, which views choices as mere appearances influenced by external causes – leading to the illusion of choice – libertarian freedom asserts that true autonomy requires the absence of predetermined influences and outcomes. Oord emphasizes that genuine freedom is irreconcilable with complete determinism, necessitating authentic options and the possibility of randomness in creation. This framework invites a

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[210] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 160-161.

[211] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 157-158.

critical distinction: we are either genuinely free or our actions are predetermined.[212] While understanding libertarian freedom as posited by process theologians can illuminate aspects of human agency, one might still question the adequacy of this framework in fully capturing the complexities of the moral landscape we navigate.

Oord's understanding of freedom centers, naturally, on free will, asserting that agents choose based on self-determination rather than external dictates, maintaining that real choices yield actual consequences.[213] Quoting Richard Taylor, he says, "If anyone is responsible for what he has done, then he must have been free."[214] Thus, Oord claims that when we make moral judgments, we affirm a libertarian notion of free will. However, while I agree with him that we are morally culpable for our choices and that we have the ability to freely choose among real options, I find flaws in his application. He insists that this freedom is rooted in a self-determining will, which is to say, the will/desire necessarily precedes the choices from which we choose. We can freely choose among options, but the will determines the options – that is, options from within the realm of possibility – from which we choose. His notion of causal independence suggests that desire precedes choice. This seems logical and, as we saw earlier, is echoed by Hart.

But it raises a different question: that is, whether we can choose that which we desire. I contend that our desires may be shaped by biological, sociological, and psychological factors; however, they are fundamentally rooted in the protological declaration, "Let us make humanity in our image" (Gen. 1:26). Therefore, desire, in its pristine form, is fundamentally granted as a protological reality that precedes creation. Simply put, desire is the *imago Dei* in humanity aching to find fulfillment, as "deep calling to deep" (Ps. 42:7). While many desires arise from previous choices – e.g., I never desired coffee until I had

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[212] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 59.

[213] Oord's nomenclature at this point is reflective of other scholars who use the terms like agent causation (viz. Timothy O'Connor) and sourcehood (Kevin Timpe). He prefers the term self-determination. Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 59.

[214] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 59.

my first cup – some, like the biological desire for sex, remain inherently present, even in the absence of social pressures. Behind it all, though, is a deeper desire for goodness: I like the way coffee makes me feel; therefore, coffee is good, etc. We can freely choose from among options, but the will determines the options from which we choose. This presents a significant challenge to the concept of true libertarian freedom as Oord articulates it.

In the Edenic narrative, Adam and Eve exemplify innate desires that are not mere emergent phenomena.[215] In Genesis 3, they face a choice that is compelled by innate desire: to eat or not to eat of the forbidden fruit. Desire manifests in three ways: the woman sees that the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is 1) good for food, 2) pleasing to the eye, and 3) desirable[216] for wisdom (3:6). Significantly, Genesis 2:9 employs similar language to describe the entire garden's fauna, suggesting that desirability is not unique to this singular tree or to a narrative bound to failure and sin. Furthermore, God's act of breathing into the formed (יצר) human, making them a living being (soul/creature: נפש), implies that these desires are divinely instilled rather than emergent properties.[217] If will is equivalent to desire, as Oord suggests, then true freedom arises from the innate will and desire that are divinely inspired. This perspective challenges Oord's concept of free will, which asserts that the individuated will originates *wholly within the creature*, independent of the Creator.

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[215] N.b., I am decidedly not treating these passages as scientific explanations of the cosmos. Instead, my reading employs the literary genre of myth as an exploration of reductive protology, an exploration of how Scripture intuitively comprehends that which is essentially human in a state of innocence: i.e., essential humanity.

[216] נחמד is the participle form of חמד and is used here and in Genesis 2:9. Of note is where desirability is placed within the strata of those things that are informing Eve's free choice. In 2:9, desirability is qualifying the eyes, usually translated as "pleasing to the eyes"; yet in 3:6, desirability is for the gaining of knowledge or wisdom. Perhaps merely a source-critical transmigration of the word or perhaps nothing more than poetic license; yet it seems that the concept of desire is moved from the merely phenomenal "nice to look at" into a noetic sublimation of "knowing." Thus, we are aware that we are aware of our desires; yet those desires, themselves, seem to be inhered within consciousness as a transcendent virtue.

[217] For free will as an emergent property as freedom *ex machina*, consider: "The gradual increase of complex life in evolutionary history eventually led to the emergence of free will. *Identifying the origin of free will is difficult*," in Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God,* 54. Italics added. Consider, also, Hart's unabashed dismissal of freedom viz. consciousness in *All Things Are Full of Gods*.

Conversely, I argue that we cannot choose our desires, as they are inherently inscribed in creation as reflections of their transcendent sourcehood. Just as God cannot choose to not love because God is love *in se*, creatures cannot choose to not desire what makes us fundamentally human. As Genesis 3:6 illustrates,

> So, when the woman saw that the tree was good for food [innate biological desire], and that it was a delight to the eyes [innate aesthetic desire], and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise [innate sociological desire], she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

This shift in understanding implies that consciousness is the awareness of desire, suggesting that organisms, in varying complexities, recognize their innate desires and can choose what satisfies their desires. But freedom is *not* the ability to choose *what* one desires or *that* one desires; rather, it is freedom to choose how one responds to that which desire compels the agent.

Therefore, I reject the notion of libertarian freedom that insists that individuals create their desires or are even their source. Instead, I argue that the source of desire in creatures is a reflection of its transcendent source. Such a perspective challenges the libertarian conception of freedom, suggesting instead that true agency lies in recognizing and responding to the divinely instilled desires that shape our humanity. This nuanced view will lay the groundwork for my subsequent arguments regarding teleological freedom, positioning it in contrast to libertarian freedom in the following chapter. As we explore the implications of these distinctions, we are naturally led to Oord's notion of essential kenosis, which challenges us to consider the interplay between divine love and human agency. Through the lens of theodicy, he raises crucial questions about genuine evil, randomness, and how divine love informs our understanding of freedom.

Essential Kenosis

Oord's exploration of essential kenosis begins, predictably, with the issue of theodicy. He questions how genuine evil and randomness can coexist with divine providence without implicating God as the author of suffering – an issue he believes classical theism fails to address. His model suggests that God possesses an intrinsic inability (covert cataphasis) to prevent evil or impose divine will upon

creation. Such interventions would call God's goodness into question; for example, why does God perform a miracle in one instance but not in another?[218] For Oord, a simple appeal to "divine mystery" is merely an evasion of the difficult questions raised by classical models. Instead, he posits that a proper understanding of God's essence – defined as love (1 Jn. 4:8, 16) – is crucial for grappling with these theological dilemmas.[219] This understanding forms the basis for his concept of essential kenosis, which is most fully expressed in the Chalcedonian confession regarding the hypostasis of Jesus Christ.

The fourth ecumenical council in Chalcedon provided theological explication concerning Christ's dual nature, focusing on the divine attributes Jesus retained in his humanity and those he relinquished through self-emptying.[220] Recent scholarship has shifted from analyzing what Jesus retains of his divinity to exploring how he reveals God's essential being.[221] This shift allows Oord to examine God's nature in relation to Jesus, emphasizing that kenosis, as articulated in Philippians 2, highlights not loss in Jesus per se, but the embodiment God's own kenotic love.[222] Jesus takes on the form of a bond-servant, humbling himself and becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. For Oord, this passage illustrates God's self-emptying nature, affirming that love is the core of God's essence.[223] If Jesus is "the exact representation of God's nature" (Hebrews 1:3, NASB), we must conclude that God is fundamentally self-giving and others-empowering for the common good. This understanding shapes Oord's definition of love

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[218] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 185-186, 212-213.

[219] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 151-153.

[220] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 263–66.

[221] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 154-155.

[222] While the Greek word, *ekenōsen*, is variously translated, I am primarily interested in Oord's usage which understands *ekenōsen* (lemma: kenosis) as "emptied." Thus, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied (*ekenōsen*) himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phil. 2:5-7, NRSV). Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 153.

[223] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 156, 159-160. He is careful to qualify these remarks with a warning that self-giving does not mean that God is made less God by "emptying" Godself and equally, neither does it mean that that which God loves in this kenotic way becomes divine in the same way that God is divine. God remains fully God and creation remains created.

and his conception of God as love, where love means "to act intentionally, in sympathetic or empathetic response to God and others, to promote overall well-being."[224]

Oord's kenotic interpretation significantly influences his view of God, revealing what he claims are inherent issues within classical theism's baptized versions. A central critique he raises is the emphasis on apophatic language that shapes our understanding of God and divine interaction with creation, where divine omnipotence is often regarded as the foremost attribute. Terms like "sovereign" and "almighty" reinforce this perspective. The problem, he insists, arises when God is primarily understood through God's power; this means that how we conceive of God's sovereignty, knowledge, and presence must be mediated by God's all-encompassing potency. For Oord, this leads to a troubling conclusion: if God is primarily power, then God cannot be good. God could unilaterally prevent all that contradicts goodness yet chooses not to.[225] In his mind, the all-too-frequent recourse of invoking divine "mystery" serves only to defend a God who selectively intervenes while usually choosing to remain distant in service to a "mysterious" plan. Oord argues that this kind of apophasis reduces God to the level of a sovereign jerk or an inept demiurge, thus failing to capture the true nature of divine love.

While I appreciate Oord's emphasis on love as central to God's being, I must contest some of his conclusions. His definition of love – "intentionally acting, in sympathetic/empathetic response to God and others, to promote overall well-being" – is, if anything, too narrow. *Prima facie*, there is nothing in this that is conspicuously incongruous with classical theism. However, when placed within Oord's corpus and his explicit commitments to process theology as a hermeneutical framework, we begin to see how this

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[224] Thomas Jay Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010), 52. This definition will form the basis for analyzing and critiquing his conclusions.

[225] This interpretation of classical theism is not unique to Oord. David Bentley Hart critiques this misconstrual, which he terms "two-tiered Thomism," emphasizing the insurmountable distance that separates God's realm from creation. In this view, the God of heaven descends to earth in arbitrary and unpredictable ways. This "descent," often framed as a "miracle," mistakenly assumes that the natural laws of creation are distinct from the divine supernature. Hart sees this as an aberration of the tradition's true teachings. David Bentley Hart, *You Are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

definition is crafted to bolster his own theological underpinnings. Thus, we must examine the implications of Oord's definition more closely.

Love is introduced as an action rather than merely an emotional sensation, which is essential since love is recognized only when it manifests through demonstrative expression. Thus, love is inherently relational, requiring an "other" for its expression; without this relational aspect, genuine love cannot exist. Therefore, when Scripture declares, “God is love,” it underscores God’s relational essence, signifying that love is central to both God’s ontology and economy. Creedal history succinctly encapsulates this: to say “God is love” is to affirm “God is Trinity.” However, Oord’s definition of love as promoting “overall well-being” is inadequate. If “God is love,” then love cannot be defined apart from God. While love indeed nurtures communal and ecological flourishing, the phrase “general well-being” lacks clarity and direction. His experiential approach raises broader concerns regarding process theology, particularly its lack of a definitive telos. Although he cites biblical expressions like *kenosis*, *agape*, *eros*, etc.[226] to elaborate on love, he fails to anchor these within the eschatological vision present throughout Scripture, ultimately leaving us with a definition devoid of any teleological purpose. “Overall well-being” is thus amorphous and directionless.

A theological grammar that lacks a teleological impetus can cultivate a vague spirituality devoid of hope. The Hebrew Scriptures anticipate a messianic kingdom inaugurated in Jesus’ ministry and culminating in the eschatological kingdom of Christ’s *parousia*. This presents a hope, purpose, and promise that are simply absent in process theology. Without a telos, the altruism in Oord’s definition of love falls flat. Although he correctly focuses on the Christ event, it lacks the eschatological promise of Easter morning. Essential kenosis positions us at the cross but leaves us suspended between Friday evening and Sunday morning, where “general well-being” can be practiced but fails to address the commonsense notion that something is still missing. Concepts of libertarian freedom echo this

[226] For a biblical survey and theological exploration of the different ways that the Bible speaks of love, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* (Grand Rapids: William B.. Eerdmans, 2001).

hollowness, insisting that individuals must derive their desires and will from a kind of spiritual willpower. In a cosmos where every possibility is a potential actuality of God's ontology, there is little for which to hope, and much cause for despair. If God is becoming what the cosmos is, then even love cannot save the complex, compositional divine being from entropy. Oord's definition of love is altruistic; Scripture's definition is divine. One may lead to a better life…perhaps. The other leads to God.

Ultimately, this refers to a teleological eschaton: a kingdom that imbues our current waiting with purposeful action – a love that reflects and anticipates a promised kingdom. My criticisms do not contradict Oord's definitions; I suspect he would share my teleological hope, even if he disputes my critique. He hints at this when he states, "The argument from evidence affirms that God seeks to establish the kingdom of love, to use biblical language. Among other things, this means promoting overall well-being, flourishing, or shālôm."[227] I wholeheartedly affirm this sentiment, as the Kingdom of God is indeed the Kingdom of Love. In response to his biblical appeal to shalom, I too will reference it as the foundation of God's loving economy, forming the basis of my proposal in the following chapter.

Summary

In our exploration of process theology as a response to classical theism, we examined the critiques put forth by Alfred North Whitehead and his successors, including Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, and Thomas Jay Oord. Central to process theology is the rejection of the doctrine of divine simplicity and the classical theistic framework that supports it. This contemporary "Neoclassical" perspective asserts that God is not a static, unchanging entity but a dynamic being whose existence is intricately connected to the material world. In this view, God's nature evolves alongside creation, suggesting that as the world undergoes change, so too does God experience growth, complexity, and increased perfection.

Thomas Jay Oord advances this idea of a "becoming" God by emphasizing that divine love, encapsulated in the assertion "God is love," remains constant even as a mutable God interacts with a

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[227] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 184.

mutable world. Oord introduces the concept of "essential kenosis," framing God as fundamentally self-emptying. This approach seeks to address the problem of theodicy by asserting that God's non-coercive love respects creaturely freedom, thereby allowing for genuine relationality.

However, while process theology presents compelling critiques of classical theism, it also faces significant challenges. Notably, its ambiguous teleological framework raises questions about clarity regarding divine purpose and hope. I contend that Oord's notion of libertarian freedom is flawed and lacks a definitive telos, leading to uncertainties about divine intent. This gap underscores the necessity for a more robust teleological framework that aligns human freedom with divine intent. The concept of teleological freedom contra libertarian freedom will be a feature of the next chapter, emphasizing that the ultimate aim of love is not merely general well-being but the realization of God's kingdom.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have traversed the intricate landscape of divine simplicity, engaging with both its defenders and critics within the framework of classical theism. By examining the robust arguments of proponents like David Bentley Hart and Paul R. Hinlicky, we uncovered the profound tensions that arise from the relationship between divine simplicity and the concepts of freedom and determinism. Hart's rigorous defense situates divine simplicity as foundational to a coherent theological framework, while Hinlicky's critique of traditional simplicity reveals the complexities inherent in reconciling divine immutability with the dynamic nature of biblical revelation. Simultaneously, the emergence of process theology, particularly through figures like Thomas Jay Oord, challenges the traditional understanding of divine love and sovereignty, inviting us to reconsider the implications of a relational and evolving God.

As we reflect on these discussions, the necessity for a more nuanced understanding of divine attributes becomes evident, particularly with respect to the interplay of love, freedom, and purpose. The critiques highlighted in this chapter underscore the importance of articulating a vision of God that transcends mere philosophical abstraction and resonates with the lived experiences of faith. This exploration sets the stage for a reimagining of divine simplicity, one that harmonizes both the apophatic and cataphatic dimensions of theology. By doing so, we can develop a more comprehensive

understanding of God's nature that embraces relationality and transformative love, paving the way for a deeper engagement with the divine in the unfolding narrative of creation.

IV. A Proposal for a "New" Neoclassicism: Shaloming Simplicity

Introduction

Our exploration has traced the philosophical roots of classical theism from ancient thinkers like Plato to modern interpretations, revealing a trajectory that often results in deterministic fatalism. Central to this discussion is the doctrine of divine simplicity, which traditionally asserts that God is immutable, impassible, and timeless. These attributes, derived from philosophical constructs, have been critiqued for conflicting with the dynamic and relational portrayal of God found in biblical narratives. This tension necessitates a reevaluation and rearticulation of divine simplicity that honors both its philosophical origins and the scriptural witness. Therefore, this chapter proposes a fresh approach to understanding divine simplicity, termed "Shaloming Simplicity," as part of a new neoclassicism.

To accomplish this, we suggest integrating both cataphatic and apophatic theological grammar, allowing for a more nuanced articulation of divine simplicity. Classical theism, influenced by pre-Christian philosophical traditions, often clashes with the biblical depiction of a God who is engaged and responsive; who is presented as capable of change, deeply passionate, and actively involved in history. By considering these perspectives, we aim to reconcile the immutable and impassible God of classical theism with the vivid, relational God as revealed in Scripture.

What follows will proceed in two parts. First, the metaphysical foundation of divine simplicity will be established by embracing the classical apophatic tradition. However, the apophatic claim will be given a cataphatic expression through the scriptural statement, "God is love." Second, with this understanding, divine simplicity can be reinterpreted to reveal a God who remains unchanged in essence yet is dynamically engaged with creation. This reinterpretation challenges the departure from classical tenets found in process theology and aims to offer a cohesive, scripturally grounded vision of God that preserves the integrity of the classical doctrine while making it heuristically accessibility.

Part I: Apophatic Cataphasis

We begin where Paul Hinlicky and Tom Oord left off. Each has articulated their arguments from a similar conviction: philosophical apophaticism is insufficient for knowing God. Hinlicky insightfully

notes that "divine mystery...can never be comprehended but can be described and thus recognizable by the mind of creatures."[228] For him, knowing God is tantamount to recognizing God's *actus* within the world; through this recognition, we can describe what God is like, even though God can never be fully comprehended. Divine knowledge is gained when God reveals Godself through divine action within creation, specifically grounded in the cataphatic language of Scripture. This means we cannot deduce knowledge of God through propositions or natural theology but only through active participation in God's revealed law.

For Oord, knowing God is akin to "creating" God. This does not mean to suggest he believes that God is merely an invented deity; rather, process theology's version of the "becoming" God posits that knowledge of God is primarily constituted in relational experience within the world. This makes experience the ultimate voice of authority that defines God rather than revealed knowledge. Thus, along with Hinlicky and Oord – each with very different concepts of God – I affirm the conviction that apophatic propositionalism is insufficient; yet my own proposal diverges considerably from theirs.

In what follows, I will make my case for an apophatic cataphasis, arguing that a divine epistemology must include an interdisciplinary approach that integrates philosophy, metaphysics, and theology into a substantive whole. This will compel us to articulate what God is, rather than merely stating what God is not, culminating in the specific claim: "God is love." Finally, love itself will need to be defined, which will lead us to examine the biblical motif of shalom, where I will demonstrate that love's economy is the shalom-ing activity of the divine *esse*.

Divine Epistemology

Creation is inherently composite. This principle has been a foundational axiom throughout these pages, and here it takes on real substance as a means of knowing God. Essentially, everything that composes the world serves as a pathway to understanding that which cannot be directly observed: *how* we know fundamentally shapes *what* we know. The way we assemble thoughts, concepts, words, and

[228] Paul R. Hinlicky, email message, November 29, 2022.

descriptions, as well as the material elements of nature – molecules, atoms, quarks, and the like – will determine the shape of our understanding. This is especially true when we confront the mystery of God. Sometimes, this assembly yields fruitful ideas about God that bring us closer to understanding who God truly is – closer to Truth.[229] However, it can also lead us astray if our constructions are based on flawed premises. Ultimately, how we perceive God, whether right or wrong, will become the god we worship, the god we loathe, or the god we deny.

Within the epistemological framework, scholars often construct their versions of God based on their specific disciplines, as if their approach were the only valid pathway to knowledge. For instance, in broad caricatures, we might say that the philosopher presents a propositional God that makes rational sense within their discipline: a logical God. Likewise, the metaphysician seeks understanding by searching for underlying principles that govern the cosmos, engaging in a natural epistemology that looks beyond what can be seen. For the theologian, knowing is framed through the eschatological lens of revelation, rooted in Scripture and historical context – a supernatural epistemology that rests on what has been revealed.

However, relying on a single, discrete epistemological lens will yield only a one-dimensional view of the subject. This has been evident in previous chapter's interlocutors, each offering a unique perspective: Oord, the philosopher; Hart, the metaphysician; Hinlicky, the theologian. What is required is a syncretism that acknowledges the distinct truth claims of each perspective as different yet *not* mutually exclusive. In doing so, our one-dimensional epistemological frame expands into a knowable yet incomprehensible three-dimensional God. Therefore, I am adopting (and adapting) an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the contours of each discipline as necessarily interconnected. This forms the basis for my assertion that the grammar of pure apophaticism is just as independently flat as pure cataphaticism. What is needed is an apophatic cataphasis.

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[229] To borrow a phrase from the popular philosopher, Robert Lawrence Kuhn.

God *Is* Love

The grammar of *via negativa* has been a crucial aspect of previous chapters, so we will not revisit that ground. However, what has been largely absent is the grammar of *via positiva*. While Hinlicky provided a Scriptural grounding for cataphasis, I challenged the validity of his positive ascription, which is rooted in God's role as redeemer – an accidental property that speaks to God's essential nature but does not clearly articulate what that nature is, only that it is what God freely became. However, Scripture *does* use cataphatic grammar to convey God's reality, or God's "isness." This is seen in principle throughout Scripture but is made explicit in 1 John 4:8, 16: "*God is love*, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (4:16, NASB). My claim is simple: what philosophy has apophatically said of God – that God is simple – is cataphatically articulated as "God is love." Therefore, I propose that God's metaphysical simplicity, as classically conceived, is love: God *is* love.

However, our creaturely understanding of love is so multifaceted and nebulous that this claim seems, at best, ambiguous and, at worst, damaging. When, in a single sentence, I can speak of loving my wife and loving Hostess Raspberry Zingers, something is amiss. Or, if I go to Scripture and find all of the instances where love is invoked, I discover that there are too many variants of the word to draw any meaningful conclusions (e.g., Heb. *hesed*, *ahavah*; Gk. *agape*, *phileo*, *eros*, etc.[230]). Instead of focusing on a single "love" variant – say, *agape* in Greek or *hesed* in Hebrew – I will employ a canonical principle that is endemic throughout the Bible. Oord opts for a similar approach through his usage of kenosis. To be sure, God's "self-emptying and others-empowering love" is not to be ignored or taken lightly, but I find its canonical usage to be too textually localized and, like Hinlicky's usage of redeemer, grounded in an accidental property that may speak about God's essence but does not define it.[231] Instead, the biblical

[230] For a survey of the theological and biblical concepts of love see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans). Also, for a more contemplative approach, see Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

[231] Certainly, Oord would disagree with me on this point, as that is precisely how he uses it when he names it *essential kenosis*. But in Philippians 2:3-11, Jesus' "emptying" has soteriological purposes which implies that the *kenotic* action is a response to a creational need. For Oord, this is not a problem since creation is as necessary to God

word and theme that *is* explicit and implicit throughout the Bible, as well as within ancient and modern Semitic cultures, is the principle of shalom.

A Vision of Shalom

Just as I have equated divine simplicity with the cataphatic language, "God is love," I now equate "simple love" with the biblical concept of shalom. In this sense, shalom is the means by which we come to know love and, thereby, know God. It enables us to see what love is; shalom is the cataphasis of love made visible, even though love itself evades definition in apophatic mystery. C.S. Lewis' famous aphorism comes to mind: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else."[232] By analogy, light is distinct from its source yet not independent of it; one "begets" the other and logically precedes it, even though both exist in simultaneity. Consequently, shalom is not merely synonymous with love; we cannot say, "God is shalom" any more than we can say that light is the sun. Instead, it represents the *oikonomia* of love, allowing us to affirm, "God is love," and consequently, "God loves [shaloms]." Here, love serves as the ontological foundation (*esse*), while shalom is its economic expression (*actus*). Therefore, we will seek to establish shalom's proper biblical context and meaning by engaging with Walter Brueggemann's *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*.[233] First, we will provide an overview of shalom as articulated by Brueggemann, particularly in relation to its presence in the Exodus narrative. Second, we will explore how shalom is actualized at the eucharistic table. This examination will conclude the section with a biblical example of how shalom might function as a hermeneutic, anticipating and participating in the God who is Love.

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as God is to creation; therefore, God's mission in the world is identical to God's triune relationality: what God does *for* creation constitutes God's ontology within the Godhead.

[232] C. S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 140. Kindle.

[233] Walter Brueggemann, *Living toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*, (New York: United Church Press, 1982).

God is Shalom(ing): Brueggemann's Vision of Shalom

Shalom[234] is typically translated as "peace." While this is a useful translation, it also does a disservice to the word, tending to make it mean nothing more than *cessation of conflict*. Certainly, this is true; but shalom encompasses so much more. Randy Woodley offers a cheeky rejoinder to this overly simplistic concept of peace: calling shalom peace is "correct only if you consider it correct to call the Grand Canyon 'a large crack in the ground' or the Pacific Ocean 'a large pool of water.'"[235] It resists all attempts to give it a singular definition because it is more of an intuitive concept (or principle; I prefer "promise") that needs to be demonstrated than it is a word that needs to be defined. In fact, its application as a concept within Scripture demonstrates how broadly it can be applied and how it connotes the kind of divine love that is to be reflected. It is the concept – the principle or promise – that we will be pursuing with Brueggemann's help. And while there are plenty of instances in his exploration of shalom where he says, "Shalom is…," he never completes that thought with one pithy summarization, so neither will I.

Brueggemann's vision of shalom is one that is fully relational and fully inheres in the divine life as both the starting point for unitive relationality (tri-unity) as well as its eternal destination: Creator to creature to creation to Creator. God is relational community *in se*, suggesting (demanding) that all that God does is equally relational. Shalom is the description of that unity, not a substance *sub ipsa*, as if God's oneness coheres by a "thing" called shalom, but a description of persons fully and perfectly existing as three-in-one. Instead, he suggests that it is the substance of the eschatological vision of Scripture in the nearest thing he offers toward a concise definition:

> *Shalom* is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all of creation. It refers to all those resources and factors which make communal harmony joyous and effective… [Therefore, the] origin and the destiny of God's people is to be on the road of *shalom*, which is to live out of joyous memories and toward greater anticipations.[236]

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[234] In what follows, I will be using "shalom" in a variety of iterations. It is, of course, a transliteration of the Hebrew שלום but will be deployed here as if it is an English word to which I will liberally add suffixes and the occasional prefix: e.g., shalom, shaloming, shalomed, and un-shalomed.

[235] Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*, Prophetic Christianity (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 1.

[236] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 16.

His central operative metaphor of "vision" suggests a divine ontology that constitutes the way in which God does all that God does. It is out of God's unitive tri-personal being that God creates a creation and creatures who are themselves persons, living fruitfully in communal union with God, each other, and creation.[237] As this active shaloming occurs within creation as a reflection of God's oneness, it not only constitutes creation as a whole, but also grants personhood, whereby the shalom community recognizes its individuals as distinct persons who are necessary to the community, just as every part of a body is necessary to make the individual a whole person.[238] When a community lives toward a vision of shalom, every part is constituted in the right to *a* name – "identity" or "personhood" – as well as the right *to* name – "covenant," i.e., you are to me as I am to you (Gen. 2:19-20).[239] It also includes the memories of the community, the stories that have shaped and defined them and that bind them together by reminding them from where they have come (Ex. 3:6, 20:2, 1 Cor. 11:23-26, 15:1-8).[240] This is the all-important "we" of communal identity that draws all of its constituents into a single narrative where everyone and everything necessarily inheres.[241] And with the communal memory – where "we" have been – the future narrative is shaped, that is, the vision – where "we" are going.[242] Here, especially, is the vision that shalom curates: the shalom community is one of profound hope. Thus, I summarize Brueggemann's concept of a shalom community as persons (naming), past (memory), and promise (hope).

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[237] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 15. See also Woodley, *Shalom: Greater than the Sum of Its Parts.* As a member of the Cherokee nation, his work pays especial attention to the interconnectivity of nature and humans living in harmonious balance.

[238] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 15.

[239] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 15.

[240] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 15.

[241] Consider also the Seder ritual in which the Passover event is retold by the ritualized eating, the prayerful recitations of Scripture, and especially, the way the celebrants remember the story. E.g., *Child:* "Why is this night different from all other nights? *Respondents (everyone):* "*We* were slaves to Pharoah in Egypt…"

[242] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 15.

For our purposes, I am suggesting that this framework forms the content of *how* love behaves. It is a vision given ample isolated descriptors throughout Scripture: "love, loyalty, truth, grace, salvation, justice, blessing, righteousness. But the term that…has been used to summarize that controlling narrative is *shalom*."[243] I will focus, as Brueggemann does, specifically on "justice" (*mišpat*) and "righteousness" (*tsedeqa*) as concepts that form the "irreducible substance of shalom."[244] Their antitheses, "injustice" and "unrighteousness," are the results of love's antonym: fear.[245] Fear (and shame) motivated our first parents to hide from God and from each other. Fear motivates violence, hoards resources, and refuses to see our neighbor as a neighbor. Fear is anti-shalom, reified in injustice and unrighteousness. On the other hand, love loves by shaloming; therefore, where there is a community of shalom, there is love, or vice versa. Love is undone by fear. And fear, when left to itself, unidentified and unnamed, will manifest as anti-shalom, so that what shalom integrates, anti-shalom dis-integrates. The consequence is that injustice and unrighteousness become the language of the dis-integrated community, and the results are universally catastrophic. Even in our creation myth, humanity somehow moves – in scene one – from the tree of getting-knowledge-apart-from-God and a bite of fruit to scene two, where brother kills brother. From fruit to fratricide just by turning the page. Brueggemann calls it "un-shalom" and describes it as the "paralyzing impression that we are never heard or taken seriously. And, therefore, [exodus events] are not possible and life must be as it has always been."[246]

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[243] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 16.

[244] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 94.

[245] Notice, I did not say that love's opposite is hate. Hatred is *perverted love*, not *love denied*. You can only actively hate someone that you have first loved. A closer concept to love's antithesis would be *apathy*. However, it is fear that tends to destabilize love. Consider what motivated Pharoah toward his oppressive actions: it was the recognition that the Hebrew children were "more and mightier" than the Egyptians were and that if war were to break out between Egypt and another nation, the Hebrews would join with their enemies. "*So* they appointed taskmasters…" (Ex. 1:8-11).

[246] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 160.

Consider Israel's central narrative, the exodus event, as a case study. Here is a nation of people who have lost their identity as a people *and* as persons. Instead of having the right to freely name their place and purpose in the world, they have been burdened by the name given to them by a tyrant: slave. That is who they are; it is what they do. When their slaver is mentioned, he has no name, only a title. *Pharaoh* is the oppressor. He could be anyone. Egypt is the place of their bondage, but it could be anywhere where systems of power disembody and dehumanize. And this king does not know and has not heard about the heritage of these people and the story of Joseph (Ex. 1:8). Their past is forgotten in the brickyard of production and the never-ending quotas so that Pharaoh can gain more power on the backs of the powerless. They are slaves, so memory is consumed by a false identity; they have always been slaves, and they will always be slaves. There is no hope, only groaning and crying out from under the whips of an oppressive system. They have no future.

But shalom offers a promise: a hope and a future (Jer. 29:11). I suggest that shalom provides a telos of "how it is going to be" in the midst of "how it is."[247] Shalom is a theology of hope[248] that speaks in the eschatological language of the "new world that is about to be given."[249] Love's opposite – fear – enslaves, dehumanizes, and commoditizes communities and trades the shalom community of neighborly mutuality, societal responsibility, and resource stewardship for the societal (and spiritual) hierarchical ordering of people and goods as enemies, villains, and commodities. Un-shalom is un-creation, where chaos creates (or uncreates) the world we fear. It is a tautological irony that the very thing we are afraid of is created by our fear. But the prophetic language of shalom enacts *mišpat* and *tsedeqa* as disruptive to the chaos of un-creation, un-shalom. This is why the Exodus narrative forms the hermeneutical center of salvation history. It is the story of those who had lost their freedom (unnamed, unhomed, unalive, unfree), who are now marked by sacrifice (redeemed), rescued through the water (reborn), emerging out of the

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[247] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 99-101.

[248] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 74.

[249] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 127.

depths with singing and dancing (rejoicing), bound to their rescuer by the "hassle" of covenant[250] (renamed: *My people*), through the wilderness made ready for The Land (restored), and always with the promise of a place where they will fully embody their new identity (re-Newed).[251]

At this point, it seems prudent to draw explicit corollaries to this project. While Brueggemann has helped to give shalom content and purpose, its deployment is left to us.[252] I have made the claim that love is the cataphatic language of divine simplicity and that love is expressed economically as shalom. Love expressed as shalom recognizes injustice and unrighteousness and *acts* (that is, *loves*) by refusing to allow love's opposite, fear, to denude that which God loves from becoming what love has created it to be. Shalom is fully inhered within the triune community, not as a fourth "something" that coheres three essences, but as the economic expression of divine love understood as simplicity: God is love. Therefore, whatever Love freely creates will inherently possess an economic expression of God's ontological simplicity: shalom as the expression of divine love is meted out within creation.

But where shalom – unitive, communal wholeness between creature and creature, creature and creation, and creation and Creator – is disrupted, fear binds creation into slavery. The slaver is ensconced in the fear of losing power and fear of the other, so he robs the weak to make them weaker, builds his empire on their backs, assembles his armies, and destroys anything perceived as a threat. The slave is ensconced in the fear of daily survival, daily quotas in the brickyard, joyless toil, and a loss of hope – no name, no place, and no future. So the slave forgets who they are and is lost in meaninglessness. Here is the point: *wherever love is not, there is no freedom; wherever love is not, un-shalom "creates" un-creation, and entelechy withers into entropy*. Love is freedom, but it is freedom that has its protology in essential Love; therefore, when love sets free, the protological identity of Love itself is recalled and

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[250] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 96. A term that Brueggemann uses to speak of the dynamic (and sometimes dramatic) interplay between divinity and humanity.

[251] This schema is not explicitly expressed in Brueggemann, however, it is a direct outworking of his premises.

[252] I say this as a qualifier. In what follows, my concepts of shalom will move beyond Brueggemann's particular grammar so that if there is error in the way it is applied, it is my error and not his.

becomes the eschatological promise so that the set-free ones become free to become what they are. Shalom is the *taxis* of divine simplicity into creation, liberating it so that it enjoys the teleological freedom (contra libertarian freedom) of divine union. This might suggest a soteriology rooted in remembrance, that is, remembering from whence we have come – unmasking false identities, unclothing false shame, and undoing false systems of injustice and unrighteousness – so that we can re-know our true identity in Love. Divine freedom is freedom to love. Creaturely freedom is the freedom to become what we are. All else is slavery. God is not free to not be God, which means God is not free to not love since God is love; therefore, the creature is only free when it is free to become what Love created it to be. To this end and for this promise Christ has come.

The Table of Shalom: A Eucharistic Application

Here, Brueggemann solidifies the Exodus narrative as the defining narrative of salvation history around the Passover table of Jesus and his disciples. Here, especially, we see the shaloming community being formed by their vicarious participation in Israel's rescue through the meal. At this table and all that it foreshadows, Jesus exegetes his own shaloming, cruciform work. It is here that we learn that "[Shalom] is an announcement that God has a vision of how the world shall be and is not yet."[253] Even before the meal, Brueggemann reminds us of the shaloming tools Jesus has left us. Before dinner, he knelt in vulnerability before all twelve of his disciples (even the betrayer) and took up the tools of a slave. "And if we have the tools of a slave, we can do only that kind of work. The towel and basin are slavely tools."[254]

Why would he do such a thing? Why wasn't he threatened by the lowliness of this slavish role and this menial task? The gospel tells us, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself" (Jn. 13:3-4, NASB). Notice, he *knows* that "He had come forth from God and was going back to God," so (or because of that), he proceeded to serve.

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[253] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 39.

[254] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 135

Brueggemann points out that all of Jesus' identity questions were settled and that this changed the servant/slave posture into a lordly position.[255] There is no fear in kneeling when you remember that God is the Source and the Summation. Here again is Love's work, giving the disciples an ecclesial identity that is bound up in the shaloming work: *As I have done to you, you also ought to do to one another*. In this way, love dismantles the world as it is by witnessing to the world as it will be. When our identity is rooted in our Source and our Summation (protological eschatology), then we can serve in powerful ways with profound weakness: a towel and a basin. When we remember, when our identity issues are resolved, then shalom gently appears with a towel and a basin. But this is scandalous because love always illuminates what is unloving. Shaloming will reveal injustice and unrighteousness, not by moralizing and condemning, but simply by loving.

Consequently, the meal that followed united each of them with the slaves in Egypt as well as the shaloming God of redeeming deliverance, who would become for us the shaloming center of our identity. Who we are is remembered in the meal; the table is the place where our condition is named, where the systems of corrupting influence are encountered, and where a new world is glimpsed. Brueggemann wonders, "Can the identity we derive from the table provide the basis for confrontation in the world?"[256] Jesus seemed to think so. The Passover meal that memorializes the story of deliverance was now the way the disciples were to "remember" him. This shaloming act of remembrance unfolds in two parts.

First, we remember (recall) the story of our slavery. Their story becomes our story and names the condition of freedom denied by un-shalom. In remembrance, when we name the condition, there is a judgment rendered: the slave is known as a slave, thereby judging those (people or systems) who conditioned the slavery. And when we name the condition, we are also naming the need for rescue. Since the slave cannot make themselves free, the need for a rescuer must be acknowledged, must be named. Shaloming remembers, and in remembering, a kind of un-creational chaos ensues. The systems of slavery

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[255] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 152.

[256] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 147.

are disrupted. Creatures swarm and destroy crops, sickness afflicts the whole land, water is made undrinkable, and the firstborn son dies. The God who names gives a name to the slaves by which they will know him: "Yahweh—which is shorthand for 'Let my people go.'"[257] "That is the beginning of shalom. A brickyard in which that statement is uttered."[258]

And in that remembrance, we eat, sometimes hastily as if we've got somewhere to be, somewhere where slavery is not even a thing. The bread is quickly baked without any leaven and the lamb is roasted because we do not even have time to boil the water and simmer the mutton. Where before, the only thing that marked the slaves were the bloodied backs of forced labor, now the blood of a sacrifice marks the doorposts of their homes, that is, the threshold into that sanctum where they have taken up residence in the land of slavery: blood above the door while the flesh of the carcass fills their stomachs. Remembrance is the disruptive act of shaloming, but that old world must be uncreated so that space may be made for the new world. Before the slave can leave, he must attend to the remembrance that uncreates the slave and exposes the slaver. When the slaver is exposed, the savior is revealed.

Second, when we remember, a new world comes into view. In the old world of nameless slavery, brickyards, and slaughtered babies, there was a kind of order. But it was an order that favored the favorable and forgot the forgettable. Class, status, wealth, and power existed because there were those who had none. The weaker served the stronger. The powerless served to give power to the powerful. It is no different today. "This is the way of the world," we suppose. "It is what it is," we say. And it never dawns on us that there might be another way, until suddenly, we are eating the flesh of a sacrificed lamb. Piece by piece, the lamb quickly disappears. "Eat it all," they were instructed. "Don't leave any leftovers. But don't take too long, we're in a hurry" (Ex. 12:8-10). Soon, the whole lamb was gone, either consumed by the people or burned in the fire.

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[257] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 57.

[258] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 55.

Like the nameless slaves, this lamb became little more than a ritualized commodity. Hurry up! Hurry up! How many Hebrew slaves had been consumed by the rush of Empire? Hidden in the sand, burned in the fire, buried in the mud pits of the brickyard, or just left as carrion for the birds and the jackals. Here was a people who had been dis-membered: violently severed from their identity, forgotten in the nameless anonymity of their slavery, and treated as nothing more than disposable machinery. There was no shalom. How could there be when these people were so dis-membered?[259] But in eating this piecemealed peace-meal, the dis-membered lamb was reconstituted by the shaloming community. In eating, the dis-membered body was re-membered: remembrance as re-membrance. The identity of the shaloming community is actualized in the body of the broken lamb, made whole in the broken, un-shalomed community, thereby making the community whole. Out of the chaos of a fractured, forgotten, and fragmented people, a new order emerges, and a new world is reified in a meal that re-embodies (remembers) shalom as the meal that sustains the shalom community for the journey of deliverance and the promise it anticipates. Brueggemann makes a similar claim:

> The folks that night at the table ended their homelessness. All the issues were settled; like their Lord, they knew where they had come from and where they were going. And that is what we celebrate every time we go to the table. We do not celebrate our success or fidelity, or our good feeling, or a "worship experience." We celebrate that the identity questions are settled, that anxiety is gone, and therefore we are freed to regal vulnerability, to assume the posture of a king as he did, a posture of empowerment for nobodies.[260]

The no-bodies become the em-bodied. The shaloming community is shalomed so that it may move in hope into the eschatological kingdom/land of shalom, shaloming as it goes.

The Hermeneutic of Shalom

How might this inform our reading of Scripture? If we can credibly say that shalom is the economy of divine love, then it is reasonable to say that this becomes *the* hermeneutical model through

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[259] Here with "dis-memebered" and in what follows, I will employ a series of wordplays with the English language that are not expressly present in the Greek of the NT or the Hebrew of the OT, but which helps to conceptualize the principle of shalom(ing) in the event of exodus/Eucharist. This rendering *only* works with English syntax.

[260] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 152-153.

which Scripture is read. If the cataphatic biblical ascription, "God is love," means anything at all, it must be comprehended as an ontological claim; otherwise, all we can really say is, "God is loving," as if love is an accidental property. If that is true, then we can say nothing of God at all and must hide away in the shadows of apophatic nihilism where the only thing that can be known is nothing at all. Or more appropriately, if apophasis reigns unchecked by cataphatic revelation, then it is God who hides away in the shadows of obscurity. But Scripture tells an entirely different story: God speaks; God creates; God inheres God's own image within creation; God reveals. Or summarized in the most scandalous verse in Scripture, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14).[261] This is God's shaloming *actus* that brings creation into union with the simple God who is simply Love. I maintain that the Christological center of God's cataphatic being is more than a deferral to what God is not, so that in Christ, we may positively say what/who God is: simple Love revealed in shaloming union. As a hermeneutical case study, we'll consider Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to his disciples from John 20.

On Easter Sunday, the resurrected Christ appeared to the disciples behind the locked door of the upper room. They were afraid that those who had crucified Jesus were now coming for them. Fear – love's antithesis – had de-shalomed this small band of Jesus followers. The one who had given them identity and purpose was now dead and gone. But the rumblings of something unimaginable were beginning to circulate. The women who had gone to the tomb had reported strange things. I imagine it was a little chaotic as the world they had always known was violently disrupted. Suddenly, Jesus was standing in their midst! And the first thing he did was speak into the fear that had locked them in behind those doors and made them slaves to the system that had crucified their teacher.

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[261] Paul Hinlicky makes a similar claim in a podcast interview where he says, "I don't know how more universal or inclusive you can be than to say, 'the Word was made flesh and dwells among us.'" Tripp Fuller, "Divine Simplicity, the Incarnation, and Inclusion with Paul Hinlicky," Homebrewed Christianity, accessed December 9, 2024, https://www.homebrewedchristianty.com/2017/02/28/divine-simplicity-the-incarnation-and-inclusion-with-paul-hinlicky/.

"Peace be with you."[262] Appearing in the midst of their locked-up condition, he spoke an eschatological assurance. Disbelief was most likely the response to seeing their crucified friend. So, to confirm his identity, he showed them the imprints from the wounds incurred on the cross. This physical demonstration of his identity recalled the events of the past three days and implicitly insisted that there is a way through this slavery to death. The wounds begged a question: *Do you remember what happened*? Suddenly, their fear seemed trivial in comparison. They were afraid of those powers that had seemingly defeated Jesus. But now, Jesus was there and very much alive. The wounds named their slavery, and the scars insisted that a new world was appearing. As soon as they saw those scars, rejoicing broke out. They were shalomed from fear to worship, like Moses singing on the other side of the parted waters and like Miriam dancing as she sang along with the congregation of women. The wounds named the old world for what it is, slavery; but they also declared that there is a way through.

And now in their "gladness," Jesus again speaks to them the same words, "Peace be with you." In the first greeting, his peace disrupted and delivered them from their slavery. With this second offer of peace, a command is given as a new ordering of the world of chaos in a way that anticipates the new world. As Brueggemann has insisted, *peace is a gift and a task*.[263] In what follows, I liberally apply this hermeneutic of shalom to the remainder of the passage in John 20:19-23.

> As the Father has sent me [into locked rooms filled with frightened and enslaved people who don't yet know that they have no need to fear], so I am sending you [all, as a shalomed community, into a peaceless world, as witnesses of what the other side of fear looks like: gladness]." And when he said this, he breathed on them [like that protological moment when God's own breath vivified the man of dust, so too with these disciples, bringing life from the dirt,

[262] *eirḗnē* is the Greek equivalent to shalom.

[263] Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision*, 85-94. In the divine economy of shalom, *gift* (grace) always precedes *task* (mission). Thus, the world is not first reordered so that peace may come; instead, it is given in community – constituting community – and then taken as task. In giving Godself, God shaloms the receiving community who becomes the shaloming community within the chaotic order of the unshalomed systems of injustice and unrighteousness.

> and now life from the dark of that upper room,] and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. [As the Spirit has enlivened and empowered me in union with the Father, so now also with you, like breath in your lungs, breathing the air of that new-world kingdom even while navigating this place of locked-up fears. This means that] if you forgive the sins of any, [that is, when you are shaloming them], their sins have been forgiven them [and they are shalomed]; [and a warning:] if you retain the sins of any [(God forbid!), and you refuse to shalom another,] they have been retained.

Summary

In this section, we have argued that our theological grammar should not rigidly favor either an exclusively apophatic *or* cataphatic approach when discussing God; instead, a dynamic interplay between the two is essential. When isolated, these approaches lead to one-dimensional understandings of the divine. To overcome this limitation, we have sought to integrate the cataphatic framework of biblical grammar with the apophatic insights of philosophy, resulting in a cohesive apophatic cataphasis. This synthesis illustrates the need for an interdisciplinary dialectic that incorporates philosophical, metaphysical, and theological perspectives, exemplified in the biblical assertion that "God is love."

While this framework allows us to articulate meaningful insights about God, the concept of love remains shrouded in the mystery of apophaticism. Indeed, the biblical text resists providing a definitive definition of love, opting instead for a broad yet ambiguous expression. Thus, “love” serves as an apophatic grammar that hints at divine simplicity, while shalom emerges as love’s practical manifestation. Drawing on Walter Brueggemann’s exploration of shalom, we have situated this apophatic cataphasis within the overarching narrative of salvation history, particularly through the lens of the Exodus and its realization in the Eucharist. This approach equips us with a hermeneutical framework for interpreting Scripture and, hopefully, provides a means of “knowing” God. This will be the task of Part II.

PART II: SHALOMING SIMPLICITY

I could have said yes. Instead, I said no.

Those two sentences are my story and immediately recall what David Ray Griffin called a commonsense notion: the notion that I had a *real* choice in that moment.[264] There was a moment when I could have said yes but didn't. It was over 40 years ago, and my 8-year-old self was standing in the church where I grew up. Reverend Moss was the evangelist preaching on this weeknight, and I was angry that I was at church when I would have much rather been at home on our small Illinois farm. He had given an invitation to come and pray at the altars. I stood, gripping the back of that pew, knuckles white, hanging on for dear life. I knew I was supposed to go. I don't know how I knew; I only know that I was supposed to go and pray that night. I could have said yes. Instead, I said no. I knew then what I know now: God did not keep me in that pew to accomplish some divine plan, nor did God force me to walk to the front and kneel. I have wondered what might have been different had I stepped out that night. Instead, the "no" of that night became a pattern for nearly 20 years. I was free to choose, and that free choice robbed me of my freedom.

He could have said no. Instead, he said yes.

On that same Illinois farm and in that same church, I watched as my dad began to hear that same voice that had spoken to me that night. My parents were in their mid-life when my dad heard God tell him to enter full-time pastoral ministry. This meant that the man who had never finished college because he had been drafted for a tour in Vietnam was now moving his family of six over a thousand miles away to begin college at the age of 40. It would cost them everything they had known as they left our entire extended family who all lived within a few miles. It would cost him the ire of my maternal grandmother, who was not a believer and could not comprehend what he was requiring of our family. I lived the life of my dad's "yes" and watched for the next 30 years as he pastored his one and only church. He could have said no; instead, he said yes. He was free to choose, and that free choice gave him freedom.[265]

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[264] See footnote 198 in Chapter 3 for a fuller definition of a "commonsense notion."

[265] My dad, Reverend Ron Jewett, just retired from pulpit ministry. May God find us all so faithful. Thanks Dad.

Even as an eight-year-old boy, I encountered the tension between free will and determinism – a theme echoed throughout this project. This tension has led us to reexamine the doctrine of divine simplicity, a cornerstone of our theistic tradition that has shaped our understanding of God for centuries. While this tradition offers a rich heritage, it also poses challenges when its philosophical underpinnings seem to conflict with the relational God depicted in Scripture. This legacy cannot be merely dismissed, as many critics have proposed. It has informed our theological vocabulary and understanding across generations. However, while we dare not simply dismiss the doctrine because of the criticisms it has endured, neither can we ignore what those critics have claimed.

Therefore, my proposal seeks a synthesis that respects both the apophatic and cataphatic dimensions of theology. By asserting that "God is love," we aim to bridge the gap between philosophical doctrine and scriptural witness, offering a coherent vision of God as both simple and relational. In this proposal, we will reaffirm the philosophical roots of divine simplicity while introducing a relational dimension that emphasizes love and engagement with creation. This approach not only challenges deterministic interpretations but also seeks to harmonize the inherited magisterium with lived faith experiences, providing a theology that resonates with both the academic and pastoral dimensions of our spiritual journey.

Proposal: Shaloming Simplicity (An Apophatic Cataphasis)

I am proposing a rearticulation of divine simplicity that integrates the apophatic tradition with the God presented in Scripture, in a form of apophatic cataphasis. I am calling this rearticulation "Shaloming Simplicity," and it proceeds in five stages. At the center of the proposal is the analogy of a perfect circle as a way of speaking about the classically simple God who relates dynamically within Godself and creation. First, we will unpack the analogy by applying the mathematical ratio of pi (π) to the triune life, as a way of speaking of the Scriptural claim that “God is love.” This will lead to a view of God’s creative act as the shaloming economy of God’s essential being. Additionally, the question of freedom, central to this project, will be explored within this framework, where I will propose and defend a teleological freedom contra libertarian freedom. In the final two sections, we will explore the implications of the

proposal on divine simplicity's derivative doctrines of immutability and impassibility, where I hope to reconcile the immutable nature of God with the dynamic interaction of divine love within creation. Through this lens, we are invited into a deeper understanding of how God's enduring presence and transformative love lead us toward the promise of resurrection and ultimate reconciliation.

God is Love: An Analogy of Simple Triune Being

At the outset, I gladly acknowledge the limitations of the language of analogy. There are instances when language can only approximate that to which our inquiries incline us. Analogy moves us closer to speaking about that which is beyond language, but it can never comprehend it and will eventually fail when the analogy is pushed too far. I say this so that we do not mistake the analogue for the reality. Thus, the analogue infers more than it says but is always in danger of saying more than it should. I proceed with caution and would beg caution for the reader as well.

Consider the concept of a perfect circle as a singular, "simple" thing. It is not composed of parts like a square with its four lines or a triangle with its three. There is no reducible component to a circle that allows you to say that *this* + *that* = circle.[266] We can measure a circle's circumference and derive its diameter; in this way, we might even suggest a creedal grammar where the circumference is always "begetting" its diameter. But we cannot invert this relationality and start with the diameter and thereby infer a circle. A diameter without a circumference is just a line; therefore, circularity is logically prior to diameter. Each aspect of circle-ness is intrinsically connected to the other, but none can be said to comprise the circle: "circle" simply *is.* Consequently, the circumference and the diameter are in direct relationship to each other, and this relationship is expressed in the mathematical ratio of pi (π), that is, circumference divided by diameter. Remarkably, it does not matter the scale of the circle. It can be as

[266] I'm utilizing a kind of geometrical logic, recognizing that a circle involves definitional components like circumference and diameter, which are essential to its identity. One might also point out that a circle's circumference is technically "composed" of an infinite set of points. These are definitional obstacles that must be acknowledged *and ignored* in order for the conceptual "simplicity" of "circle." However, what I am attempting to demonstrate is that these "components" cannot obtain independently of each other. Additionally, this could be expressed in three dimensions with the same effect.

small as an electron or as large as the known universe; regardless, the relationship between each aspect is the same: π. Additionally, that relationship is infinite (3.14159…*ad infinitum*).[267]

This provides a heuristically accessible analogy for discussing both metaphysical divine simplicity and economic complexity within our framework of apophatic cataphasis. While a circle has a measurable boundary that undermines the analogy against God's infinite being, the principle still functions within the analogy by imagining an unbounded, infinite circle. Although I hesitate to equate different aspects of circle-ness with the divine persons of the Trinity for fear that this might devolve into another form of modalism, it ultimately proves helpful in furthering the analogy. Therefore, if we consider the infinite circumference as a referent to the Father and the diameter as a referent to the Son – who alone comprehends the infinite dimensionality of the circle's diameter – then the eternal relationality of Father to Son is expressed in the eternal procession of π as the Holy Spirit proceeding from intrinsic and necessary relationality. Put differently, the Father eternally begets the Son, who fully comprehends the infinite being of God through the eternal procession of spiritual relationality. What I am attempting to convey by analogy, St. Paul expresses as doxology in Ephesians 3:14-15:

> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its *name*, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to *comprehend* with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to *know* the love of Christ which *surpasses knowledge*, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (NASB, italics added).

In this passage, the act of "naming," in line with Brueggemann's naming principle, underscores that God as Source gives actuality to all of creation. Paul further illustrates that the Christ who "[dwells] in your hearts through faith" serves as the believer's grounding in love, enabling a comprehension of the divine that is realized only within the community of believers (the saints) – a community constituted by

[267] One last note on the inadequacies of the analogy. The infinite progression of digits that is the numerical expression of π is a quantitative infinity (that is, a progression that has a starting point but continues infinitely); however, I will be treating it as a qualitative infinity (that is, the concept of infinity that is beyond any finite measurement). Thus, we find ourselves wrestling again with actual apophaticism and covert cataphaticism. At present, π has been calculated to over 105 trillion digits.

love. This allows us to "know" the love that "surpasses knowledge." Thus, knowledge of the divine reveals a love that "knows" what is revealed while simultaneously pointing beyond itself to ever-greater, eternally unfolding knowledge: *knowable unknowability*. Therefore, the Father is the Source (circumference) within whom all that is has its being; Christ is the "breadth and the length and the height and depth" (diameter/dimensionality) of God; the Spirit is the empowering relationality between the Father and the Son (π), in whom we are seated so that we, who are corporately the "fullness of Christ," are "filled up to the fullness of God" (Eph. 1:22-23). This cosmic reality is instantiated in corporate identity by a protological grounding in divine love, allowing us to *know* the love of Christ that is beyond *knowledge*. Again: the eternal *Logos* alone can comprehend the "dimensionality" of divine *esse* in relation to the Father as expressed in the Spirit of relational reciprocity. Said simply, "God is love." Divine simplicity, defined as Love, is the eternal beginning and the eternal horizon of all reality.

However, while love may "define" simplicity, it defies definition and can only be revealed, making love the apophatic mystery of divinity.[268] Mystery, properly understood, is not a retreat into unknowability or an "escape hatch" for cognitive laziness; rather, it is the doorway that invites us into divine revelation, where God's *esse* is revealed through God's *actus*. This revelation of divine simplicity as love invites us to explore how this foundational truth manifests in the unfolding of creation as God's shaloming economy.

Love Loving: Creation as God's Shaloming Economy

In exploring the connection between divine simplicity and creation, we encounter the mystery of how the infinite interacts with the finite. Scripture provides glimpses of this mystery, revealing Christ as the central figure through whom all things come into being, embodying the fullness and coherence of God

[268] For these reasons, as mentioned earlier, I do not believe that "love" can be fully defined, whether by Oord or by rote biblicism. An example helps make this concrete: imagine a person who has never been married. We might provide them with all the written resources on the history of marriage, as well as all the good advice on navigating it. In that regard, they may even become experts in the knowledge of marriage. However, one cannot "know" what it is like to be married unless one is married. In this instance, what makes marriage "knowable" (experience) is the very thing that reveals it as a continuing mystery.

– that is, the eternal *Logos* as the unifying center of divine love. By envisioning creation within God's boundless nature, we recognize that everything exists within the divine essence, negating any notion of separation from God.[269] As creation unfolds through perichoretic love, it reflects God's inherent nature, where freedom is the expression of God being true to God's essence. This eternal relationality reveals the ongoing journey of creation's union with the divine, always moving deeper into the heart of God. The prologue to John's Gospel tells us, "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (Jn. 1:3, NASB). Similarly, in Colossians, we read, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created…all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col. 1:15-17, NASB). The eternally begotten Son of the Father, who comprehends the infinite expanse of God, is also the means and coherence of all things.

Imagine our infinite, simple circle where the height, breadth, depth, and width are fully comprehended in the *Logos*, who spans the infinite diameter of the Father's boundless circumference. Every point within this infinite plenitude functions as the center; thus, the *Logos* is always at the center of simple Love, continually holding it together in the *actus* of shaloming simplicity, where the Father/Son relation is expressed by the infinite ratio of the Spirit. This is articulated in the "moment" of creation, though this does not necessarily imply a temporal event, given the apophatic atemporality of God. In this "moment," Love creates freely and graciously, bringing forth an "other." However, this "other" is not beyond or outside of God; the concept of an "outside" would delimit God's being and render the infinite finite. Therefore, within the infinite points of this simple Love, there exists infinite "space" for finite creation. Just as the *Logos* is always at the center of Love, so too is creation that is created "by him, through him, and for him." Like outstretched arms, the universal Christ reaches to the infinite edges. Yet

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[269] For example, as in two-tiered Thomism, especially as described in David Bentley Hart, *You Are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022). Also, this notion seems to underlie dispensationalism with its epicurean distinction between Creator and creation. N.T. Wright has made this a central feature of his scholarship, e.g. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

creation can only grasp the infinite God within its finite capacity, where the experience of God is realized through the relationality (the Spirit) between the Father and the Son. Thus, Christ is the heart of creation, the metaphysical coherence of divine life, and creation encounters this divine life through its participation with Christ.

Pushing the analogy further, we might suggest that our experience of the relationship between the Father and the Son through the Spirit is accessible within the Spirited infinitude of the divine essence. At the risk of treating the divine life like an equation – potentially negating apophatic simplicity – I aim to demonstrate this through our operative analogy. When we conceptualize this relationship as the equation of infinite circumference divided by (or comprehended by) diameter, the resultant "answer," 3.14159…, serves as a means of accessing the divine inner life. Our knowledge of God always comes through the Spirited relationality between the Father and the Son. Thus, if I multiply the circumference by pi (Cπ), I discover the diameter; conversely, if I multiply the diameter by pi (dπ), the circumference is revealed. The point is this: just as the Spirit (π) represents the revelation of the relationality between the Father and the Son, it is also the means by which creation encounters that inner life. We exist in the Son, who comprehends the Father, to whom we gain access through the Spirit, who embodies shaloming relationality itself.

Think of it as a journey through each digit, or a temporal iteration of divine revelation, where our experience of Spirited union continuously unveils more of God and draws us deeper into the heart of God's being, all while infinitely reaching toward the horizon of the divine. This eternal spiration reveals who God is, digit by digit, as it were. Our life in the Spirit continually moves us closer to the simplicity of Love; paradoxically, the more we progress through revelation into the heart of God, the more complex God appears. God simply *is*, while we are always *becoming.* Thus, soteriology is not merely a discrete historical event; it is an eternal becoming in union with the Spirit, who draws us into the eternal shaloming economy of the Father's love for the Son. In this sense, the act of creation is the work of salvation, where God is always shaloming, bringing all that exists into divine union with God. Paraphrasing Sergei Bulgakov, Hart makes a similar claim: "[Creation] and salvation are a single divine

act: the way whereby the eternal divine Wisdom, 'repeated' in the mode of the created, brings all things into being by drawing them to their divine source and end."[270] Consequently, the protology of creation is rooted in God's simplicity: Love.

Thus, God freely creates out of God's very nature. Freedom, when properly understood, is the freedom to embody the demands of being itself; that is, God cannot *not* be God. God cannot *not* love because God is love. This understanding eliminates the notion of God existing in a "god-realm," deliberating among infinite options about what to do next. God is not weighing choices; rather, what God freely does is always aligned with love. This is true freedom – God is free to be God. When God creates, it is an expression of love, an act of shaloming that reflects divine Oneness, bringing forth creation as an extension of God's essential being. This understanding forms the protological center of creation and points to our eschatological end, where all things are drawn into the fullness of God's love, culminating in the eternal union of the created with the Creator. Said simply, protology is eschatology.

Essential Freedom as Teleological Freedom

However, this soteriology has not adequately addressed sin, evil, or brokenness – what is termed un-shalom. Oord and others rightly argue that love does not coerce but grants humanity the freedom to choose among real options. However, Oord's concept of freedom treats it as an emergent property rather than a creaturely reflection of the Creator.[271] Consequently, it is not that the creature is free *because* God is free; rather, it is that the creature is free *as* God is free. Libertarian freedom presents this as an either/or proposition, whereas I suggest that it is a both/and reality. In other words, teleological freedom asserts that creatures are contingently free because God is essentially free.

Since God is love and cannot act against God's essence, creatures inherit the freedom to be what they were made to be, aligned with their given nature. Thus, a genuinely free choice aligns our protology

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[270] Hart, *Theological Territories,* 73.

[271] "The gradual increase of complex life in evolutionary history eventually led to the emergence of free will. *Identifying the origin of free will is difficult*." Oord, *Uncontrolling Love of God*, 54. Italics added.

with our eschatology, creating a space that harmonizes who we are essentially with what we are becoming consequently. Just as an acorn is free only when it is liberated to become the oak tree it was meant to be, humanity is free only when becoming fully human. If our nature is to be human and being human is good, as the creation story asserts, then choosing dehumanizing actions is not freedom but slavery – it's anti-creation, un-shalom. Fundamentally, this is sin: it denies protological identity, loses its teleological horizon, and ceases to become what it is. Humanity is free to choose, but we choose between fulfilling our nature or becoming enslaved to what we are not. True freedom is teleological: the freedom to become what we are meant to be. Rowan Williams captures this sentiment:

> God makes the world to be itself, to have an integrity and completeness and goodness that is – by God's gift – its own. At the same time, God makes the world to be open to a relation with God's own infinite life that can enlarge and transfigure the created order without destroying it.[272]

Thus, Christ remains central to creation, even when humanity forgets its protological identity. Death, as a consequence of this forgetfulness, embodies un-shalom, where denying eternal life leads to eternal death. Yet God is love, and love shaloms by imbuing divinity into humanity through the hypostatic union of the Incarnation. This does not imply that God adds our humanity to God's divinity as if something were lacking in God; rather, the incarnation integrates God's divinity into dehumanized humanity, re-humanizing us. As Hart states, "The incarnation of the Son of God is the actual *redemption* rather than destruction of humanity, precisely because all that makes us human is already wholly present in God."[273] It is God's divinity within humanity that awakens our inherent identity as *imago Dei*, reviving us from the stupor of forgetting who we are. Soteriology, then, is theosis, whereby our re-humanization is effected, reflected in John 10:34: "Has it not been written in your Law, 'I said you are gods'?" Or as Athanasius said, "For He was made man that we might be made God."[274]

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[272] Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), loc. 90. Kindle.

[273] Hart, *Theological Territories*, 73.

[274] Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 4 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), 65.

Therefore, teleological freedom aligns our being with our divine purpose, reflecting the divine essence instilled in us. But it is a dynamic journey, one that invites us into a relationship with a God who is both unchanging and actively engaged in creation, prompting us to understand how an immutable God interacts with a changing world.

Mutable Immutability

I have proposed that creation and salvation are a single act. That is commensurate with the simple God who is *actus purus*. God's activity is always a singular expression of God's simple *esse.* What God *is,* God *does*; what God *does,* God *is.* However, according to divine simplicity, God's action cannot incur change within God since change – mutability – requires the presence of unrealized potential. This cannot inhere within the simple God because if God changes, then there is something *ad extra* to the divine life, thereby making God compositional. Yet, Scripture has many instances of God changing: e.g., God's mind is changed in a heated conversation with Moses (Ex. 32); God repents for making humanity (Gen. 6); God changes the statutes of Torah even saying, "I gave them statutes that were not good" (Ezek. 20:25).[275] And then there are the scars by which Jesus was made known to his disciples following the resurrection. The resurrected and glorified body of Christ was indelibly marked by the brutality of humanity. Recent exegetes have made these instances, and many more, an area of intense study and many have concluded that an immutable God is *not* biblical.[276] Here, there seems to be a hard line in the sand; it cannot be both,

[275] See the excellent treatment of this theme in a recent book by Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).

[276] The following examples functionally deal with both divine immutability *and* impassibility, so will shape the later discussion on impassibility as well: Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 14 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Revised and updated (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019). To a considerably lesser degree, also consider, Michael J. Gorman, *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant: A (Not so) New Model of the Atonement* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014); Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul's Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019). Gorman's work has emphasized the participatory nature of divine/human co-operation. Though he appeals to many of the classical dogmas, his work reifies divine immanence in ways that could be construed to a soft-mutability (and passibility) within the divine.

can it? What can we say that doesn't betray the cataphasis of Scripture or the metaphysics of divine ontology? I will venture a proposal by returning to our analogy.

To begin, I have claimed that salvation is the eternal journey of the creature into divine life through the relationship of the Father to the Son by the Spirit – sharing in the Son's life as revealed by the Spirit through infinite spiration. Our analogy considers this spiration through the lens of π, 3.14159…in perpetuity. π is a universal constant, meaning that no matter where you are in the universe or the scale you use, if calculated correctly, you will always arrive at the same answer. *Always*. There is an *immutable* nature to it. For instance, if you calculate to a googolplex[277] of digits, you will always obtain the same result. π is infinitely expressed yet immutably predictable. However, in certain equations that do not require its infinite precision, π is often approximated, such as using 3.14. This feature will help us navigate the apophatic cataphasis necessary to reconcile the metaphysical proposition with the Scriptural witness. I will refer to this approximation as the "round-up/down point." For example, if you only need to approximate to five digits, 3.14159 would round to 3.1416. Implied in the 6 are all the digits that follow: 3.1415*9265358*… While the round-up point may change, this adjustment allows us to apply the number to different contexts; yet within this change lies the inference of the entire infinite construct chain.

For our purposes, I propose that something like this occurs within the divine economy of shalom. Our finite lives cannot comprehend infinity, so as we traverse this eternal salvation journey into the divine being, God meets us at the point in our lives that we need and permits an apparent change in the divine nature that is really a divine accommodation. It is a kind of *perceived mutability through divine adaptability*. It is a grace that allows us to perceive the infinite (revelation) without comprehending the totality (mystery). Now the danger lies in the propensity to stagnate in the place of familiarity where *I know what I know* or more parochially, *God said it. I believe it. And that settles it for me.* Additionally, there are moments when we simply cannot proceed further than our brokenness will allow us to go. God

[277] That's a 1 followed by 100 zeros or 10^(10^100). The number is so large that it surpasses the estimated total number of particles in the observable universe.

says, “Okay, let’s stay here for a while and when you’re ready, there is a lot more of me left to explore. I will never change, but I will always meet you right where you need me.”

We see examples of this in Scripture. Earlier, I mentioned the changing nature of some of the Scriptural statutes. Consider the dietary laws of the Pentateuch, which have been observed for generations and remain integral to the religious practices of many today. Yet, one day at about noon, Peter went up on a rooftop to pray. While waiting for lunch to be prepared, he had a vision: a sheet filled with all kinds of unclean animals descended from heaven – four-footed animals, crawling creatures of the earth, and birds of the air. He heard a voice commanding him to get up, kill, and eat. Three times he saw this vision, and each time he responded, “No way! I’ve never eaten anything unholy or unclean.” God’s voice insisted, “Don’t call what I have made clean unholy” (Acts 10:9-16). The vision ultimately pertained to the Gentile home he was meant to enter; however, Peter had avoided those animals (and presumably dining in Gentile homes) because the Scriptures guiding his life had prohibited it. God met His people at their point of need, inscribing laws in their sacred texts, and then “changed” God’s mind when that need has passed. If space permitted, it would be worthwhile to explore Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, noting instances where he countermanded or modified earlier commands from Scripture. Shaloming simplicity allows us to see these moments as God’s grace meeting us in places where we cannot conceive of God beyond our circumstances, where God “changes” or adapts (the round-up/down point) until we are ready to explore the infinite chain of being implied in that constrained space. In this way, God provides for adaptive relationality within the divine life, which is both immutably secure and infinitely adaptable.

Just like π, I am convinced that if we were able to “do the math” of God – that relationality of Father to Son, experienced in the shaloming love of God’s eternally proceeding Spirit – we would find that the “equation” always works out the same. But along the way, there are infinite points of grace where God accommodates our cultures, our conditions, and our creaturely natures so that we may have the time that we need in order to move further into the salvation story of God’s eternal horizons.

Passionate Impassibility

The 20th century stands as a testament to humanity's capacity for violence and suffering. With two world wars, concentration camps, nuclear threats, and countless conflicts, it was a century defined by fear and violence. As products of this world, many have become accustomed to this grim reality, fostering a sense of ambivalence toward the disruptions of peace and creation. This backdrop challenges the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility, suggesting it may no longer resonate within contemporary ecclesial consciousness. For instance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from prison before his execution, poignantly captured this tension. He observed that we are called to live as if God were absent, yet in this absence to know that God is especially present in our suffering. Thus, he writes, "The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; *only the suffering God can help*."[278] This underscores a shift from viewing God as an impassible, unmoved mover to one who is intimately involved in human pathos. Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God* critiques classical doctrines by emphasizing a theology born from the shadows of Auschwitz.[279] His work suggests that the divine response to suffering is not distant omnipotence but active participation in human suffering and redemption.

These theologians, among others, invite us to reconsider divine impassibility not as emotional detachment but as a profound engagement with creation's suffering. We have shown how God's essence remains unchanged even while God is dynamically present, transforming suffering through divine adaptability. This transformative engagement is most vividly revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, where immutable love meets human pathos. As such, it seems inconceivable to speak of a God who loves but does not endure what love demands – namely, shared suffering. Moltmann insists that this perception leads to a rejection of the Greek concept of a perfect being: "As *actus purus* and pure causality, nothing can happen to God to cause him to suffer… [Alien] to him are love, compassion, and

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[278] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works - Reader's Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 464-465. Italics added.

[279] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: 40th Anniversary Edition*, loc. 117. Kindle.

mercy."[280] This notion seems to contradict the biblical narrative of a God who experiences anger, regret, sympathy, and, most importantly, love. Thus, our understanding of divine love must expand beyond limited definitions to encompass a broader vision of shalom – where love and peace guide us toward reconciliation and resurrection.

Therefore, a doctrine of impassibility that detaches God from creation and renders God statically and stoically unaffected by suffering is one to be rejected. However, a more nuanced understanding is provided by Rowan Williams when he states that "the doctrine of divine impassibility affirms…that God is not passive in relation to other agents on the same level, not part of an interactive system." This relationality indicates that God does not receive anything in God's nature that adds qualitative substance to God. As shown above, if we assert that the hypostasis of Jesus Christ brings humanity into divinity, we imply that something is lacking in God. So too with suffering: to claim that our suffering brings affective change to God implies that there is some experience that God lacks. Instead, the doctrine of impassibility is more appropriately understood as an apophatic appeal whereby God lacks nothing and therefore possesses everything; God is unaffected not because of indifference or lack of love, but because all that exists is already present to God in Christ.

Consequently, when God shares in humanity's suffering, it is not suffering itself that is carried into the divine life; rather, it is the divine life that is carried into suffering. Thus, divine impassibility, when understood through the lens of passionate involvement, reveals a God who is not distant or indifferent but profoundly present, leading us to the promise of resurrection – a shalom that transcends and redeems. God's immutable love, expressed through Christ's passion, transforms our chaos into the shalom of re-creation, where our deepest needs are met by God's enduring presence. In this instance, we can see how a richer concept of love, namely the economy of shalom, actually gives substance to suffering. Freely, God creates. Freely, God condescends. Freely, God binds divinity to humanity. Freely, God gives suffering a teleological terminus.

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[280] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 268.

Therefore, God's perceived mutability through divine adaptability meets us where un-shalom has left us: East of Eden, slaves in Egypt/Babylon, in the wilderness, in war zones of dry bones, in gulags and concentration camps, in hospital beds and cancer wards, or gripping tightly to the back of a pew. Where un-shalom has left us, God's cross finds us. Does this mean that God doesn't feel it? I suspect God feels it more deeply than we do: scourging and stripes, crowned with the thorns of our cursing, the wounds of creation now impaling flesh, and the enthronement of humanity's violence now wheezing from the lungs of a crucified God. God meets us at our point of need. God unchangeably changes and remains passionately unaffected so that we might know that at that place where we can no longer make sense of the moment – where the terminus of our growth into God's eternal simplicity is halted – there is a divine cry that comes from the lips of the human: *tetelestai*. Only there, in the simplicity of shalom shaloming, can we experience the telos of shaloming love, where 3.14 becomes 3.141… That is resurrection!

Conclusion

In this chapter, I've sought to reframe divine simplicity through a "shaloming" lens. My aim has been to bridge the classical tradition's metaphysical rigor with the dynamic, relational God of Scripture, all while quietly protesting the doctrine's reputation for inaccessibility. At its heart, this proposal hinges on a single claim: the God who *is* love cannot be reduced to a philosophical cipher or a biblical prooftext. Love, however, demands definition, and here I've turned to the biblical motif of *shalom* – not as a static ideal but as the very economy of divine activity. Walter Brueggemann's vision of shalom grounded love in a covenantal drama of justice, reconciliation, and cosmic flourishing. By weaving Brueggemann's prophetic imagination into this framework, I've tried to show that simplicity does not negate God's passionate engagement with creation but rather anchors it.

The structure of my argument reflects two interdependent movements. First, I proposed an *apophatic cataphasis* – a rejection of rigid disciplinary boundaries in favor of an interdisciplinary epistemology that bridges philosophy, metaphysics, and theology. This allowed me to affirm that while God's essence remains beyond comprehension, the scriptural witness to divine love offers a cataphatic anchor. Here, Brueggemann's emphasis on shalom functioned as the hermeneutical key. As such, shalom

was envisioned as the active work of repairing fractured relationships, a divine praxis that mirrors Love's eternal *actus*. Second, I applied this framework to classical theism through the analogy of π, a ratio embodying infinite constancy amid relational dynamism. The circle's simplicity (God *in se*) and its relational dimensions (Father, Son, Spirit) became a metaphor for divine freedom – not libertarian but teleological, oriented toward creation's participation in God's "eternal horizon."

In proposing *shaloming simplicity*, I've sought to synthesize apophatic and cataphatic grammars through Brueggemann's vision of *shalom* – not as static peace but as divine praxis. By framing divine simplicity as the π-like constancy of God's triune love, I reconcile classical immutability with biblical dynamism: God's essence remains simple, yet adapts relationally through "perceived mutability," inviting finite creatures into teleological freedom. While this interdisciplinary move aims to resolve deterministic pitfalls, its success hinges on whether it transcends paradox to inspire both doctrinal clarity and lived faithfulness. If simplicity, as shalom shaloming, can speak to the pulpit's urgency as fluently as the academy's rigor, it may yet transform the doctrine from a logical relic into a living grammar of God's unceasing, participatory love. The final chapter will explore these implications.

V. Shaloming Simplicity and Its Ecclesial Implications

Introduction

The preceding inquiry has navigated the enduring tension between classical theism's metaphysical claims and the lived economy of divine revelation, centering on the question of freedom: How might we reconcile God's eternal simplicity with the dynamism of creaturely existence in a way that honors both theological tradition and the embodied experience of faith? Our exploration has traced the development of divine simplicity from its ancient roots through contemporary debates, culminating in the proposal of Shaloming Simplicity - a new neoclassical construal that reframes divine simplicity as dynamic relationality rather than static isolation. This concept, rooted in the biblical affirmation that "God is love," seeks to harmonize divine essence with relational engagement, maintaining the coherence of divine freedom while embracing the biblical revelation of a God who embodies adaptive immutability and passionate involvement.

This final chapter explores the ecclesial implications of shaloming simplicity, employing it as a hermeneutic to reimagine the Church's identity and mission. The chapter is structured in two parts. Part I examines the concept of teleological freedom, reframing classical debates over divine sovereignty and human agency. It grounds freedom in the telos of communion with God, resisting both fatalism and the reduction of God to a mere temporal participant. This understanding leads to a "soft determinism" that envisions an eternal journey of divine exploration and creational engagement. Part II then applies this vision to the Church's mission, exploring three key areas: how justice becomes a sacrament of reconciliation, how revelation transcends static dogma to animate tradition, and how holiness is reframed as the integration of fractured selves into the body of Christ. The chapter aims not to prescribe programs but to rekindle wonder at the Church's vocation as a foretaste of the Kingdom where all things and people are drawn into the simplicity of divine love.

Part I: Teleological Freedom and the Economy of Shalom

Teleological freedom, as conceived in this work, challenges conventional notions of liberty and determinism by reframing freedom within the context of divine simplicity and human nature. This

concept begins axiomatically: *To be free is to flourish within the bounds of one's nature*. Human freedom finds its telos not in arbitrary self-determination, but in alignment with the divine image that defines us, just as an acorn's freedom lies in becoming the oak inscribed within its being. The essence of teleological freedom can thus be distilled into three interconnected statements: *I am free to be what I am*; *I am becoming what I have always been*; *I will finally be who I already am*. This reframing challenges libertarian notions of freedom as mere choice-making, proposing instead that true liberty lies in the restoration of our essential being – our created nature as icons of God's love. Therefore, freedom is only freedom if it aligns our choices with what is true to one's essential nature (protology: e.g., acorn) and its ultimate "end" (eschatology: e.g., oak). If our free will gives us the ability to choose something contrary to our essential being, we are, in fact, freely choosing our own enslavement.

This understanding of freedom is crucial to our discourse on divine simplicity, reflecting the essential being of God: love. Apophatic cataphasis insists that God transcends all categories, yet revelation permits us to say, "God is love." This divine love is reflected in creation, thereby establishing our protology: being human is inherently good. However, "human" has often become a pejorative, exemplified by the phrase "I'm only human." Teleological freedom counters this by shaloming (re-membering) our true nature, which is reified in the Incarnation where divinity is hypostatically shalomed to humanity. Therefore, in Jesus – the true human – humanity is redeemed in union with God. Only here can we find true freedom, that is, freedom to become what and who we are essentially. We re-member our humanity as revealed by Jesus, whose humanity is perfectly shalomed to divinity through the Spirited union of the Father to the Son.

Soft Determinism as Divine Pedagogy

Building upon our understanding of teleological freedom, we explore its implications for determinism, a recurring theme in this project. Conceiving of God's simplicity as the infinite plenitude of love rather than static perfection, creation becomes a free act of divine generosity that finitely expresses God's infinite simplicity. This transforms our understanding of divine determination from a rigid script to a dynamic ordering toward communion. Determinism thus softens into a divine pedagogy: the Holy Spirit

that is the relationality of Father to Son, relationally guides creation toward its fulfillment in Christ, accommodating human frailty without overriding it. Divine election, then, is not a selective decree for a chosen few but the universal vocation of all creation to participate in God's life.

Teleological freedom points us toward a destiny of eternal becoming, analogous to the infinite progression of π. As π's digits are immutably revealed yet infinitely hidden from our finite frame, our telos is "determined" by the immutable God who is always and infinitely revealing more of God's simple being. Our journey in Christ, who alone spans the infinite simplicity of God, leads us ever-deeper into God's triune being. But this does not require that every discrete event is determined or divinely ordered, only that beyond all finite choices is an infinite God whose simple plenitude comprehends all finite reality. In God, there is infinite room for all our finite expressions. God accommodates our journey with grace, patience, and even adaptive immutability and passionate impassibility. The destination – God – is what is already determined by our very creation. It is a determination that ordains all for the eternal, divine telos that is also its protological source: Alpha and Omega. Thus, determinism as pedagogy makes space for the dynamic journey into God's infinite simplicity, whereby we can say *heaven is the journey and the destination is God*. The destination is *always* God.

Eschatological Hope as Redemptive Mercy

What, then, of those who die estranged from this teleological freedom, enslaved to the liberties that dehumanize? While traditionalism has often answered with dogmatic certainty, teleological freedom calls for humility. The historical dogma of "hell" has often overreached, asserting more than Scripture reveals. This proposal challenges the notion of hell as *eternal, conscious torment*. Scripture's metaphorical references to eternal "fire" (or an undying "worm") emphasize the persistence of the fire, not the "fuel."[281] The idea of eternal conscious torment for finite transgressions is inconsistent with our understanding of God's simple nature of infinite love.

[281] For eternal fire and eternal worm see Is. 66:22-24, Mk. 9:42-48; for eternal fire see Mt. 18:6-9*,* Jude 7; for everlasting destruction see 2 Thes. 1:5-10, Mt. 18:8; 25:41; for the second death see Rev. 20:10, 14-15. In fairness to those whom Hart calls "infernalists," there are two passages that could be read to imply eternal, conscious, torment:

If God's love is the foundation of all being, even death cannot eliminate the possibility of reconciliation. The Church's hope lies not in claiming authority over eternity, but in witnessing to God's boundless mercy. While we must be cautious about post-mortem claims, our understanding of God's simplicity as love and the concept of shaloming simplicity point toward a more hopeful eschatology. This hope is rooted in God's promise to shalom all creation towards its eschatological fulfillment, realizing what our protological creation intended. This is the core of salvation and the basis of our eschatological hope.

This perspective suggests a more inclusive view of God's redemptive work, aligning with divine love's infinite nature and teleological freedom. It also demands humility in our theological assertions, acknowledging our limited understanding of divine mystery. Ultimately, this galvanizes the Church for a mission that is as inclusive as is Christ's redemptive mercy. The urgency of the *missio Dei* lies in proclaiming Christ, who brings all things to their shaloming end in God. This mission of hope is our final focus.

PART II: ECCLESIAL IMPLICATIONS: THE CHURCH AS ICON OF SHALOMING SIMPLICITY

The Church is called to mirror God's simplicity – not as uniformity but as a harmonious diversity united in Love. Just as divine simplicity transcends contradiction, the Church's unity amid difference becomes a sacrament of God's reconciling work. This challenges communities fragmented by ideology to rediscover their vocation: to be a living *tradition* (not traditionalism) where ancient faith and contemporary witness converge. In embodying this "shaloming simplicity," the Church becomes an icon – a visible representation – of God's shaloming economy, bearing witness to the eschatological hope of union with God.

Re-membering Christ's Body: Shaloming Simplicity and the Church's Mission

Brueggemann's treatment of shalom revolves around the central story of Israel's Exodus from slavery. He observes that for the slave (the un-human) to be liberated, the systems binding those slaves

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Mt. 25:46, Rev. 14:9-11. But given the rather clear biblical warrant of the remaining canonical witness, they are easily read without needing to imply an infernalist's conclusion.

must first dissolve into chaos. Chaos is the echo of our un-creation; it is the enemy of life. It is the horror of fratricide and the hasty retreat further East of Eden where our murdering brother brought the *polis* of violence to the *metro* of civilization. But it is also the center of God's invitation to a vocation of shalom: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28, NASB). But when chaos is "subdued" by brother killing brother, even the ground cries out (Gen. 4:10). It is order, but it is a chaotic order that insists that the weak serve the strong.

This chaotic order may look like progress, but it masks deep injustice. When those declaring their freedom on "self-evident truths" write that "all men are created equal" while enslaved Africans work their lands, serve their meals, and build their monuments, something is gravely amiss. It may look like order when walls are built bigger and wider, and difference is homogenized in the land of the "New Colossus" whose welcome becomes a silent mockery: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore."[282] Or in our churches, it may appear as progress when congregants become revenue streams, buildings become status symbols, and sermons become personality cults. Even at The Table, where our Lord offers his body and blood for *all*, we often determine who is welcome and who is not. In these moments, an Exodus – a liberation – is needed. Order must descend into chaos, into death, so that the old world may pass away, and the New World may come. Shalom begins in the chaos of redemption.

The church embodies this shaloming work as Christ's visible body on earth, dismantling societal divisions. However, shaloming simplicity demands that it is not accomplished by erasing distinctions, but by harmonizing differences through divine Love. In this divine paradox, Christ crucified stands as both a stumbling block to human pride and a cornerstone of God’s kingdom, irrevocably declaring the inherent and equal worth of every life. In sharing the Eucharistic meal, we re-member Christ's body, becoming one with each other and with God. The church thus becomes a beacon of the New World, embodying shalom's

[282] Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” The Poetry Foundation, April 25, 2017, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus.

virtues of justice and righteousness. Its mission is to reflect the coming Kingdom's light, bringing New World justice into old world contexts by serving the marginalized and forgotten.

Especially at The Table, Christ's real presence binds us together, transcending divisions and embodying the vision where "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for [we] are all [shalomed] in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28, NASB). At The Table, we re-member Christ's body, making it whole through our diversity. This eucharistic practice becomes a tangible expression of how "Shaloming Simplicity" challenges both deterministic fatalism and superficial inclusivity by embodying the tension between God's immutability and God's dynamic engagement with creation. If humanity's telos is union with God, then our communion must reflect that eschatological hope. This cannot be reduced to moralism, activism, or perfunctory ritualism, but must aim at re-membering – restoring individuals and communities to their creational integrity. Thus, shaloming simplicity is more than a social justice: it is radical inclusion that actively seeks out the victims of ordered exclusion in order that they too might be in-*corpor*-ated into the *corpus Christi*.

Remembering Our Telos: From Fear to Shaloming Love

Between The Table and the world lies a challenging space of transition. As we step from the unity of our eucharistic fellowship into a realm still marked by division, we find ourselves caught between two realities - no longer fully bound to the old system, yet not fully inhabiting the New World we've glimpsed. This liminal space – this threshold between old and new – often becomes a wilderness of identity where we lose our way. Our ultimate goal – union with God in the New World – becomes obscured, and we forget the covenant of our origins amidst our uncertainty.

In this in-between state, we sometimes act as if our current understanding represents the fullness of truth, forgetting that our journey with God is ongoing and ever-unfolding. This shaloming simplicity – the idea that God's simple nature as love is constantly bringing *all things* into wholeness – challenges us to remain open to God's continuing revelation.

This forgetfulness can lead us to wage war against the very culture to which we are called to be shaloming witnesses. We leave The Table behind and quickly become "hangry" Christians on a crusade to

"fix" the world, mistaking our limited perspective – our doctrines of God – for the fullness of God's being. When we forget our identity, we begin to constrain God to our own dogmatic expressions, trading righteousness for rightness. We reduce the infinite, simple God of love to a composite deity who needs defended. It is fear that attempts to codify God into an unassailable doctrine that ultimately leaves the theophany of God on the mountain for the golden calf of our own making.

But the God of shaloming simplicity cannot be threatened or diminished. Because God is immutable love, God does not need to be protected from the touch of the unclean, unwanted, unlovely, unworthy, unhuman. Because God is impassible, God feels all passions and all God-forsakenness in the pleroma of infinite simplicity. Divine simplicity means God is Love; love that shaloms *all things* into the wholeness of God's infinite plenitude so that God doesn't need to change *who* God is in order to change *how* God comes. Infinitely adaptive and infinitely passionate, this God insists that the divine revelation is most clearly revealed when humanity's violence is poured out upon the Incarnated flesh: "when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32, NIV). The unthreatening God is unthreatened by the touch of the "unworthy"; indeed, that is when God is most plainly revealed.

So I wonder, what are we so afraid of? It seems as if we have forgotten who we are. Ironically, when we forget who we are, we will also forget who God is, the God that has made us icons of God's glory: finite sanctuaries that are intended to point beyond our enclosed lives to our infinite Source. Instead, we have become afraid of what the wrong touch will do, so we protect Infinity behind our finite constructs. Our Bible ceases to be the dynamic revelation of an adaptive God and becomes a weapon aimed to destroy all that we fear: the political opponent; the racial minority; the homosexual. When we remember who we are, we will re-member others the same way. In this way, we will be shalomed to God as we are shalomed to the other.

The church is to be the Spirit-infused community – that is, a community of differences united by the Spirit of relationality – that carries us in shaloming union into the divine, eternally revealing God's simplicity in the unfolding plenitude of shalom. As Christopher and Richard Hays demonstrate in their collaborative book, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, the narrative arc of Scripture is one where God's

mercy is ever-expanding so that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28b). They challenge us: "Because God sometimes changes his mind and his approaches to the world, faithfulness to God means sometimes doing the same."[283] While I may disagree with their grammar of “change,” preferring divine “adaptability,” their point remains: the infinite God is infinitely revealing Godself and that revelation is the economy of shalom.

Holiness as Whole-ingness: Shaloming Simplicity’s Relational Ontology

In light of our exploration of the simple God who is economically whole and whole-ing, we must consider the implications for the internal life of the person. Here, trinitarian grammar offers insight: rather than viewing humanity as a collection of individuals, we understand humanity as a community of person(s). Just as we speak of the “persons” of the Trinity, we are invited to view God as personality itself. This understanding of personhood is rooted in the *imago Dei*: “It is not good that the man [person][284] should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Therefore, we see that human identity is fundamentally relational, echoing the divine simplicity that is expressed in the unity of the tri-personal God. Consequently, personality emerges within the community of inter-personal belonging, where each is informed by and informs the other. It is the whole-ing of Personality-to-person, person-to-person, and persons-to-creation within a network of interdependence in the shalomed community. Here, we see a clear distinction of modes of being but with interdependency, mirroring divine simplicity where simplicity is conceived of as Love.

We can see this played out in the biblical creation narratives: God, as Source, names humanity when it is created – *Personality*-to-persons: male (זכר) and female (נקבה) (Gen. 1:27). *The person* was placed within a garden (person-to-creation) where God observes humanity's relationship to creation by how the human named each creature (2:19-20). But for *the person* there was no suitable counterpart (עזר,

[283] Christopher and Richard Hays, *The Widening of God’s Mercy*, 205.

[284] האדם: the man or *the adam*. This is a title that generically refers to humanity, not a name. Consequently, it is often rendered “the human,” to avoid the gendered implications inherent to “man.” However, here as well as below, I will refer to “the adam” as the “person” to aid our discussion.

"helper"), so from *the person*, God fashions an-other: diversity from simplicity. When God brings this other to *the person*, she is instantly recognized as the-same-but-different and each is named by *the person* in self-same grammar: she is woman (אשה) because she is what is missing in man (איש) (2:23). Notice, "man" is only named in relationship to "woman" whose naming precedes that of the man. Here is the poetry of shalom where the simple God of love is revealed as the shaloming, creative community of the interdependence of being. Persons in unitive, whole, non-differentiated difference are forming, naming, and becoming "one flesh" so that all may stand in relation to the other naked and without shame (2:25). It is in this place of shamelessness within community that holiness is understood as wholeness: holiness as personhood and personhood as wholeness.

This relational understanding of personhood leads us to a reimagining of holiness through the lens of Shaloming Simplicity. Holiness is not a static, postlapsarian moral state or a superlative quality added to the human condition. Rather, it is a dynamic, protological process of becoming whole, enacted by the Spirit of the Whole who makes whole what has been lost or forgotten in our shameful retreat from each other and from the whole-ing God. This conception aligns with our understanding of divine simplicity as love expressed through shalom. Holiness, then, is not primarily about morality, but an ethic of action that binds what is broken into relationality, restoring our protological wholeness. It is through this process that we come to know as we are known: God re-members humanity to Godself, enabling us to remember our true nature as human beings. The result is wholed humans becoming whol-ing humanity, knowing themselves by knowing the Other and the other. In this way, holiness becomes shalom's sacral grammar and sacred work, fundamentally bound up in the act of naming – a profound expression of our relational essence and our participation in the divine simplicity of love.

The act of naming is central to our understanding of God, ourselves, and our relationship to creation and others. When we name the other, we are also naming ourselves in relation to them. For example, when we name creation as a resource to be exploited, we commoditize ourselves; when we name others based on superficial characteristics or prejudices, we fragment the wholeness that Shaloming Simplicity calls us to embody. When we dehumanize an other, we are dehumanizing ourselves. Shame

has often been the author of our naming, creating divisions and hierarchies that contradict the divine economy of love. However, holiness demands a new naming that re-members us to our true identity in God. This holiness is not a static moral state but God's active Shaloming economy, bound relationally within essential Love. It is a Love that names and thereby binds all that is within God to God. The ultimate expression of this naming love is found in the Incarnation: "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21, NASB). In Jesus, we see the challenge and invitation to name in ways that reflect the wholeness and simplicity of divine love, undoing the fragmenting effects of shame and embodying the unifying power of shaloming simplicity.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the ecclesial implications of "shaloming simplicity," a concept that reframes divine simplicity as dynamic relationality rather than static isolation. Consequently, we began by examining the implications of the teleological freedom that has been at the center of this proposal. Teleological freedom grounded human freedom in communion with God and led us to a "soft determinism" that envisions an eternal journey of divine exploration. Additionally, it offered an eschatological hope that anticipates a divine mercy that exceeds most traditionalist post-mortem renderings. The chapter then applied this vision to the Church's mission, focusing on three key areas: justice as a sacrament of reconciliation, revelation as animating tradition beyond static dogma, and holiness as the integration of fractured selves into Christ's body. Ultimately, the chapter calls the Church to embody God's simplicity not as uniformity but as harmonious diversity united in love, becoming an icon of God's reconciling work and bearing witness to the eschatological hope of union with God.

This journey into divine simplicity – reconceived not as metaphysical abstraction but as shaloming simplicity – has revealed a God whose triune life is neither inert nor indifferent, but covenantal and cruciform. By wrestling with tradition’s paradoxes and modernity’s discontents, I have argued that the doctrine’s enduring truth lies not in its immunity to critique but in its capacity to draw creation into the very heart of God’s life, where simplicity is revealed as *shalom-in-motion*. At the juncture of classical transcendence and covenantal fidelity, the God who is wholly simple meets us as the God who is wholly

shalom: not in the solitary perfection of divine attributes, but in the brokenness-embracing, estrangement-reconciling work of Christ, a work performed in the vulnerability of the Eucharist and the frail, faithful witness of the Church. Here, divine simplicity defies systematic detachment; it erupts as mission: a Love that is both mystery unveiled and movement enacted, reweaving creation's fractures through the scandal of particularity (the Word made flesh) and sacrament of shared bread. If this project holds merit, may it be as a summons: to discern in the God who *is* Love the wellspring of all shalom, where doctrine kneels in doxology, and even our most rigorous theology becomes a stammering participation in the One whose life is eternally poured out – not for God's sake, but for the healing of the world.

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