"GOD'S ONLY BEGOTTEN SON": A REPLY TO R. T. MULLINS

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"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, KJV). Countless Christian believers have learned these words by heart; indeed this may well be the best known, and most loved, of all the verses in the Bible. According to R. T. Mullins, however, the verse as quoted is mistaken in an important way. Mullins does not doubt that Jesus Christ is both divine and human, nor does he question the message of salvation and eternal life through Christ. His objection, rather, centers on the word "begotten", a word later taken up in the Nicene Creed in the assertion that the Son is "eternally begotten of the Father." He likewise objects to the assertion of the Creed that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father (and the Son)"; in other words he objects, as do a number of contemporary evangelical theologians, to the doctrine of "processions in God." In my recent book on the Trinity I affirmed and defended this doctrine.[1] Mullins has provided a lengthy critique of my defense,[2] and this is my reply. The reply comprises four main elements. First, there is a brief summary of the doctrine of processions. This is followed by a consideration of the three principal objections to the doctrine developed by Mullins. Next, there is a discussion of the difficulties for the doctrine of the Trinity if the doctrine of processions is rejected. Finally, I provide a positive account of the coherence and evidential support for the doctrine of processions.

1 William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (OUP, 2013), 214–25.

2 R. T. Mullins, "Hasker on the Divine Processions of the Trinitarian Persons", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9, no. 4 (2017). Page references in the text are to this article.

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THE DOCTRINE OF PROCESSIONS

Mullins provides a fairly extensive summary of the doctrine of processions as it is found in the church fathers. He states,

> The Father alone is the first principle. The Father is "the cause and source of the Trinitarian communion."[3] Somehow the Father's volitional activity to bring about the existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit is such that the Son and Holy Spirit perfectly share in the divine nature. Somehow the Father's causal activity guarantees the full divinity of the Son and Spirit, as well as the unity of the three such that there is one God and not three gods. (189).

Mullins emphasizes that the notion of begetting in play here is genuinely causal, not merely metaphorical. He adds, correctly, "On all this Hasker seems to be in agreement" (189). He goes on to quote my own summary of the doctrine of processions:

> *God the Father eternally communicates the totality of the one undivided divine nature to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, and in so doing brings about the existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit.*[4]

OBJECTIONS TO THE PROCESSIONS

Mullins' strategy in his critique is to compare my trinitarian views with those of Keith Yandell, another Social trinitarian who, unlike me, rejects the doctrine of processions. He will conclude that "the Yandellian view is preferable to Hasker's view because the doctrine of divine processions is incompatible with the doctrine of the Trinity" (185). I think we can see right away, without further discussion, that Mullins is mistaken about this. The phrase 'the doctrine of the Trinity' is not a neologism whose meaning is up for grabs. The phrase has a determinate denotation, and that denotation most certainly includes the assertions about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit contained in the creed of the council of Constantinople in 381 a.d., commonly known as the Nicene Creed. Other propositions may be required as well; we need not decide about that now. But a set of statements about the Trinity that excludes part of what is said about the divine persons in that creed simply cannot pass

3 Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (CUP, 2010), 264.
4 Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 220.

muster as "*the* doctrine of the Trinity." What we must say, then, is not that the doctrine of divine processions is incompatible with the doctrine of the Trinity, but rather that it is *included in* that doctrine. By the same token it cannot be the case that the doctrine of processions is incompatible with the creedal assertion that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father. "*homoousios*" also is not an expression whose meaning is up for grabs, to be assigned by us as we think best. The meaning of this expression is fixed precisely by its usage in the trinitarian controversies, especially in the creeds of Nicaea 325 and Constantinople 381. If we suppose that the *homoousios* doctrine is logically inconsistent with the doctrine of processions, we shall have to suppose that all of the church fathers involved in the controversy were grossly negligent in overlooking a blatant logical contradiction. Or if not that, then they were deliberately flouting the requirements of logic. If neither of these suppositions is at all plausible, as I judge they are not, we are bound to accept that the *homoousios* doctrine is fully compatible with the creedal assertions that the Son and the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father.

To be sure, it would be naïve to suppose that Mullins' criticisms can be disposed of by these considerations. The criticisms will surely return, only couched in different language. He can say, not that the doctrine of processions is incompatible with the doctrine of the Trinity, but rather that the doctrine of the Trinity, in virtue of its inclusion of the processions, is logically inconsistent and therefore false. And he will say, not that the processions contradict the *homoousios* doctrine, but rather that, in view of the doctrine of processions, the Son and the Holy Spirit may be *homoousios* with the Father but this still is not enough to guarantee that each of them is fully divine, fully God. So the answer to the criticisms provided above is a verbal one — but not "*merely* verbal", as though words were unimportant. Some words are very important indeed, and these among them.

The Timelessness Objection

While he has acknowledged that on many points my views follow those of the Nicene fathers, there is one point in particular on which he finds my views to be in conflict with those which are presupposed by, and incorporated into, the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. This point is divine timelessness, a doctrine

which I reject (as does Mullins himself[5]), but which, he maintains, played a crucial role in the development of the doctrine of processions.[6] He asserts, "Hasker must interpret the divine processions in a way that is compatible with divine temporality. This is not something that Hasker attempts to do. In fact, Hasker seems to be unaware of this challenge; but it most certainly is a challenge" (189). Mullins is correct that I have not previously been aware of this as a problem. Now that he has called it to my attention, I am happy to address it.

If God is temporal and not timeless, how shall we understand the doctrine of processions? On the face of it, the problem does not seem a difficult one. If the Father is not timeless, he does not timelessly cause the Son to exist. Rather, what we must say is that the Father's generation of the Son is *everlasting*—that it occurs at *each and every time*, including the (perhaps unmeasured) times before the world began. Mullins, however, will not be satisfied with this answer. He cites an argument from Paul Helm:

> As Helm rightly points out, the doctrine of eternal generation rests on the possibility of timeless causes with timeless effects in order to secure the claim that the Father and Son are co-eternal. Following Richard Swinburne, Helm notes that a common claim from divine temporalists is that all causes must be temporally prior to their effects. So if the Father causes the Son to exist, the Father will be temporally prior to the Son. What this means is that there will be a time when the Son did not exist, which is one early version of Arianism! (190)

Even granting Swinburne's claim[7] that causes must be temporally prior to their effects, the conclusion does not follow. Suppose, following that assumption, that the Father's act of generation at t1 causes the Son's existence at a slightly later time t2. (But *how much* later, one might ask?) Does this mean, then, that the Son does not exist at t1? Of course not! In that case, it will be true that the Father also exists at a slightly earlier time t_0, and the Father's act

5 See R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (OUP, 2016).

6 I don't believe Mullins makes a convincing case that the doctrine of processions was based historically on divine timelessness. He cites Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 108, as pointing out the role that divine timelessness plays in the doctrine of the processions. But Giles, interpreting Athanasius, says "If the Father and the Son are both truly God, neither is defined by time nor constrained by it. *The Son has always been and always will be*" (emphasis added). This is the language of everlasting time, not of timelessness.

7 Actually I doubt that Swinburne would extend this claim to include divine causation. But this point about Swinburne's views is not important in the present context.

of generation at t_0 causes the Son's existence at t_1. And the act of generation at t_1 causes the Son's existence at t_2, and so on. (Naturally both the Father's generation and the Son's existence are continuous; I mention discrete times merely for ease of exposition.)

So Helm's argument fails even granting the assumption that causes must be temporally prior to their effects. But I see no good reason for granting the assumption, at least not in its full generality. The assumption may hold for physical causes and effects, because the transmission of any causal influence is limited by the speed of light (though quantum entanglement may call this into question). But where God is concerned, this limitation need not apply. If God wills at t that a certain event shall happen immediately, that event happens *at t,* not at some time shortly after t. God is everywhere; there is no "causal gap" between God and things such that a time-lag has to be allowed for so that the gap can be crossed. So Helm's argument fails, and with it the objection to processions in God based on divine temporality.

The Necessity vs. Choice Objection

This however is mere prologue; Mullins' main objections to the doctrine of processions do not depend on whether God is temporal or timeless. What he does is adopt and develop a pair of objections originally stated by the fourth-century Arian theologian Eunomius. Mullins notes that in my book I do respond to these arguments; he finds my replies "a bit quick and odd" (p.10). Oddness is perhaps in the eye of the beholder, but I will agree that I may have been a little too quick. Actually, I thought it unlikely that any contemporary trinitarian would be interested in making common cause with one who was probably the most formidable opponent of the doctrine of the Trinity in the ancient church. Clearly, I was wrong about that! Here I begin with the argument Mullins presents last, since it is the one that is more easily disposed of. This argument, as stated by Mullins, is a dilemma.

> Does the Son exist by will or necessity? If the Father necessarily causes the Son to exist, the Father's actions are not free. Surely one will wish to say that the Father has free will. [...] So saying that the Father necessarily causes the Son to exist does not seem to be a desirable option. So the dilemma should push one to say that the Father freely causes the Son to exist. [...] [But] if the Father freely causes the Son to exist, the Son will be a created contingent being because the Father could have freely done otherwise. No being that is

> divine has its existence contingently. To be divine is to be a necessary being. Since the Son exists contingently, the Son is not divine. (204–205)

No doubt this is an ingenious argument, but it seems to me that it was adequately answered by a counter-question posed by the Nicenes: Does God *exist* by will, or by necessity?[8] We may be hesitant to say that God exists "by necessity", as though some sort of force or power (possibly Fate?) compels God to exist. But it also seems unappealing to say that God *freely chooses* to exist (and to continue in existence) — as though an ultimate, catastrophic act of divine murder-suicide, in which God would abolish both his own existence and that of everything else, were an ever-present possibility.[9] Rather, it is *good* for God to exist; God *rejoices* in his own existence, and it is not in any way a genuine possibility that God would cease to exist. Similarly, it is *good* for the Father to generate the Son, and to spirate the Holy Spirit; neither is the Father compelled to do these things, nor is there any possibility that he would not eternally perform these actions. The problem with the Eunomian argument is that it poses a false dilemma, which in turn is made possible by a defective view of the will. I yield to no one in my appreciation for the importance of libertarian freedom, in which there are genuine, really possible alternatives for action. But it is an exaggeration to suppose that no good and valuable exercise of the will can occur in which there is not a genuinely possible alternative. Does a loving parent find himself or herself every morning with an open question as to whether they shall go on loving and caring for their child? In the *Gloria,* we "give thanks to thee for thy great glory"; does this imply that there is a genuine possibility for God not to be glorious? Once we are clear about the answers to those questions, we will be able to see what is wrong with the Eunomian argument. Mullins, however, asks "Why can't the Father do otherwise? Why is it necessary that the Father cause the Son and the Holy Spirit to exist?" (206) My answer, quite simply, is that it is *good* for the Father to do this, and that is reason enough. I think I am well entitled to dismiss Mullins' demand that I explain *why* it is good — that is, why it is better than alternatives we might imagine, such as "the idea that a

8 Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 221–22.

9 John D. Zizioulas is one theologian who does seem to embrace this conception of divine freedom. See his *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church (*St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 18, 42–46; also my *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 105–7.

single divine person might have the universe as an adequate object of its love" (206).[10] When Mullins has provided a rationally compelling reason why on his preferred no-processions view there are exactly three divine persons, I will acknowledge that he has secured an advantage for that position.[11] In the meantime, may we not leave this question in the realm of mystery?

The Aseity Objection

The other argument — actually, the most important argument discussed by Mullins — is stated as follows:

> The first Eunomian argument is that to be God is to be unbegotten. The Father is unbegotten, so the Father is God. The Son is begotten, so the Son is not God. Hasker explains that the Cappadocians responded by pointing out that 'Unbegotten' only denotes a personal property of the Father, and does not denote a property of the divine essence. This was a poor response when the Cappadocians offered it, and it is a poor response now (194).

According to Mullins, there are actually two distinct attributes, aseity and self-sufficiency, that are essential for a being to be divine, but which, accord-

10 I do suggest as a possible reason Richard of St. Victor's argument that perfect divine love requires a perfect object, which can only be another divine person, and that the mutual love of two persons is best perfected by their mutual love of a third (ibid., 220f). I put this forward as a plausibility argument, not as a demonstration, but I do think it has considerable merit. Mullins finds this "incredibly implausible", which I regret, but I don't feel myself under any particular obligation to persuade him!

11 Richard Swinburne has devised an ingenious, and possibly sound, argument for the conclusion that there must be exactly three divine persons. (See his "The Social Theory of the Trinity", *Religious Studies,* forthcoming.) We begin by accepting Richard of St. Victor's argument that there must be at least three divine persons: since it is all-things-considered best that this should be so, the Father will of necessity bring about the existence of a second and a third person. We then suppose that, since the existence of a divine person is a good thing, any world with more divine persons is so far better than any world with fewer. This sets up an infinite series of better and better worlds, each with one more divine person than the previous world. Since the series has no end, there is no world that is overall the best. In such a situation a good person will choose one of the good options available to her; her goodness is not compromised by the fact that another choice would be still better, since this is logically unavoidable. Suppose then, the Father brings about a world in which there are n divine persons. Now, if $n \geq 4$, it will be the case that the demands of perfect divine goodness could have been satisfied with $n-1$ divine persons; it follows that bringing about the existence of the nth divine person was optional for the Father. If so, however, the existence of the nth divine person is contingent rather than necessary. This, however, is impossible: no being that exists only contingently can be divine. It follows that there must be exactly three divine persons.

ing to the doctrine of processions, the Son and the Holy Spirit are lacking. He defines these attributes as follows:

> *Aseity*: A being exists a se if and only if its existence is not dependent upon, nor derived from, anything outside of itself.
>
> *Self-sufficiency*: A being is self-sufficient if and only if its essential nature is in no way dependent upon, nor derived from, anything outside of itself (197).

Mullins remarks, "Aseity and self-sufficiency capture the Creator/creature distinction and provide a natural way for explicating divine ultimacy" (196). Mullins acknowledges that these attributes are necessarily co-extensive, but he believes clarity is increased if we maintain the distinction between them. And the implication is clear: Given the doctrine of processions, the Son and the Holy Spirit possess neither aseity nor self-sufficiency, and so they cannot be divine. The only way to avoid this is to deny the processions, which will allow Son and Spirit to possess aseity and self-sufficiency and so to be fully divine. This is a serious argument, and it may well inform a good deal of the current uneasiness about, even rejection of, the doctrine of processions. Thus, William Craig states that the doctrine of processions "introduces a subordinationism into the Godhead which anyone who affirms the full deity of Christ ought to find very troubling."[12]

I begin my response to this argument by reminding us that claims about essential divine attributes need to be scrutinized with great care. There are a number of attributes that have been claimed to be essential to deity, which nevertheless some philosophers and theologians decisively reject. Two such attributes already noted are divine timeless eternity, and the strong doctrine of divine simplicity — both rejected by Mullins himself. It is often claimed that the doctrine of God as creator of all things means that God must unilaterally determine each and every event that occurs — a view which, of course, leaves no room for libertarian free will for the creatures. The strong doctrine of divine impassibility affirms that God can never be affected in any way by creatures, which implies that the knowledge God has of creatures must be derived entirely from resources internal to God's own being, not from the creatures themselves. And so on. In pointing this out, I do not imply the Mul-

12 J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (InterVarsity Press, 2003), 594. (While the book is co-authored, it is Craig who is responsible for the material on the Trinity.)

lins' (and Eunomius') claims about essential divine attributes can be lightly dismissed; they require our most careful scrutiny. But claims of this sort are not to be simply taken at face value, whatever the source.

With that as introduction, I now propose three possible candidates for essential divine attributes. These attributes are all aspects of *independence* (or non-dependence) for the divine; they express the idea that God must not be dependent on anything outside of God. These attributes, however, are concerned only with the independence of God's *being or existence;* they do not concern themselves with other sorts of independence, such as independence of any causal influence from creatures. Having set out the attributes, we shall then proceed to evaluate them from the standpoint of different theological positions.

(I) A being Θ is *logically independent* of other beings, if it is not logically necessary that, if Θ exists, some other being does as well.

At first glance, logical independence seems to be a fundamental requirement for any being that has any claim to independent existence. Still, there are complications here that we shall need to consider further.

(II) A being Θ is *causally independent* of other beings, if there is no causal law or principle which requires that, if Θ exists, other beings also exist.

This also seems reasonably clear: If a being, in order to exist, somehow needs other beings to exist along with it, that being is not in the fullest sense independent.

(III) A being Θ is *independent of causal input* from other beings if there is no requirement that, in order for Θ to exist, some other being must provide causal input for Θ.

The point being made can be clarified by pointing out that (III) excludes only the *active causality* of another being as required for the existence of Θ, whereas (II) does not have this restriction to active causality. So (II) implies (III), but (III) does not imply (II).

Having set out these different kinds of independence for a putative divine being, we proceed to evaluate them from the standpoint of three different theological positions. The first is that of Eunomius, the fourth-century Arian. The second is that of Nicene trinitarianism, a view that includes the doctrine of processions. And finally, there is the stance of the Yandellian, whose trinitarian theology is generally orthodox except for its rejection of the proces-

sions. In each case we shall ask: for this theological position, what are the requirements for being God? And, what are the requirements for being a divine person? The difference between these two question hinges on the fact that, for a Social trinitarian, each of the persons is *wholly God,* but each person is not *the whole of God.*

For Eunomius, of course, that distinction makes no difference; there is one and only one divine person, namely the Father. Eunomius will happily embrace each of (I), (II), and (III) as requirements for being God, and for being a divine person — requirements that are met by the Father and by no one else; in particular, not by the Son or the Holy Spirit.

For the Nicene Trinitarian, things are considerably different. For the Nicene, all of (I), (II), and (III) are requirements for, and are met by, the Trinity as a whole. On the other hand, none of them is a requirement for a divine person as such. It will be noted, of course, that (III) is in fact met by the Father, and not by the Son or the Holy Spirit. This, however, is a personal attribute of the Father, deriving from his distinct role in the Trinity; it is not a part of the common divine essence, which is shared by all three persons. As we have seen, Mullins thinks this is a "poor response"; whether this is so is something we now have to consider.

But finally, what of the Yandellian? For the Yandellian as for the Nicene, all of (I), (II), and (III) are satisfied by the Trinity as a whole. One might think the Yandellian would want to say that each is satisfied also by each of the persons individually. But this creates a problem: If this is so, in what does the unity of the Trinity consist? Why don't we have, in this case, simply three different divine beings, each complete in itself? Yandell himself, as we shall see, holds that the divine persons individually *do not* satisfy (I). At this point, though, we may begin to suspect a degree of arbitrariness: Why is any sort of *causal* dependence between divine Persons unacceptable, and yet *logical* dependence of each on the others is unproblematic? Indeed, it now becomes questionable whether the divine persons can possess either aseity or self-sufficiency, since each is logically dependent on the other two, which seems to be incompatible with those attributes as Mullins has defined them.

In addition, a problem arises concerning the Yandellian's evaluation of the Nicene position. Why, we may ask, is the violation of (III) in the Nicene view a bar to considering the Son fully divine, whereas the Father's violation of (II) is unproblematic? The Father is unable to exist without the Son and the Spirit

being caused to exist by him; is this not a genuine form of causal dependence? Apparently the thought is that the dependence of a being on the *active* causality of another is a "serious" sort of dependence, whereas the need for the *passive or receptive* causality of another is not. But while this may have some appeal, its cogency is open to question. We humans depend on the active causality of air pressure to force oxygen into our lungs when we inhale, but we are no less dependent on the passive causality by which the environment permits us to exhale; preventing us from exhaling will kill us in short order. Other such examples could easily be found. Furthermore, it is sometimes urged as an objection to certain pantheistic and panentheistic schemes that, on those schemes, God could not refrain from producing a world. A God who is "bound to create", it is sometimes felt, does not have the full independence that is suitable for the being than which nothing greater can be conceived. But if the Father, in virtue of the failure to satisfy (II), is less than fully independent, this undermines the claim of inequality between the persons, the claim that fuels the accusation that the Nicene view is implicitly Arian.

I don't claim that these considerations provide a knock-down refutation of Yandellianism, or for that matter of Arianism. I think they do show that the notion of independence, as applied to Trinitarian persons, is not simple or self-evident — but if that is so, the cogency of the objections to Nicene Trinitarianism becomes questionable. It begins to look as though the decision to affirm (III) as the trip-wire for a denial of the full deity of the Son is a somewhat arbitrary choice, one we need not feel compelled to endorse.

COSTS OF REJECTING THE PROCESSIONS

To this point we have been concerned with the objections to the doctrine of processions posed by Mullins; now we need to consider some of the costs that are incurred if that doctrine is rejected. These costs are of two kinds: theological difficulties, and a difficulty in understanding the development of Christian doctrine.

The Divine Unity Problem

The theological challenge for the Yandellian is to provide an adequate account of divine unity, without appealing to the doctrine of processions. As Mullins notes, Yandell has stated his view on the divine unity in four propositions:

(T1) For any Trinitarian person P, it is logically impossible that P exist and either of the other Trinitarian persons not exist.

(T2) For any Trinitarian person P, it is logically impossible that P will what is not willed by the other Trinitarian persons.

(T3) For any Trinitarian person P, it is logically impossible that P engage in any activity in which the other Trinitarian persons in no way engage.

(T4) The persons of the Trinity have complete non-inferential awareness of one another.[13]

Concerning these propositions, Yandell states that their conjunction "defines oneness of the three."[14] I have argued that these propositions do not suffice to rule out a situation in which *each of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is an ultimate, independent source of being*, a view which I take to be tritheistic. I did not say or imply that Yandell actually holds the view in question, but a theory of divine unity that is unable to rule out such a view cannot possibly be an adequate statement of the unity of God.

But why do I say that (T1)–(T4) is so weak? (Probably, much weaker than Yandell intended.) The initial problem is that, *if each of Father, Son, and Spirit is a necessary being* (a view to which Yandell is committed),[15] then (T1) falls out immediately, *without* our having to assume any real dependence relationship between the three persons. (If the Holy Spirit is a necessary being, then it is impossible for you, or for me, to exist without the Holy Spirit's existing, but that tells us nothing, so far, about any meaningful dependence relation between the Holy Spirit and us.) But given (T1), (T4) comes at no additional cost, assuming as we must that each of the persons is cognitively perfect. And given this much, (T2) and (T3) are also unproblematic. As for (T2), the three persons are all morally perfect, and will never make mistakes in considering the value of worldly states of affairs. Even so, we might imagine, there could be situations in which, say, the Son and the Holy Spirit

13 Keith Yandell, "How Many Times Does Three Go Into One?", in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Michael C. Rea and Thomas H. McCall (OUP, 2009), 167; cited by Mullins (with altered numbering of the propositions) on p. 185.

14 Yandell, ibid.

15 Keith Yandell, "The Most Brutal and Inexcusable Error in Counting? Trinity and Consistency", *Religious Studies* 30, no. 2 (1994): 204.

initially prefer two different and incompatible courses of divine action. If this happens, however, they will surely recognize a moral imperative to reach agreement, and will succeed in doing so. (Even we fallible and imperfect human beings often manage this sort of thing.) Finally, given (T2), the persons will undoubtedly cooperate with each other in whatever way is best, as (T3) states. So (T1)–(T4) are all easily within reach — but nothing in these propositions rules out the situation in which each of the three is an ultimate, independent source of being. Contrary to Yandell, we can now say that "(T1)–(T4) *can not* define oneness of the three."[16]

More recently, Yandell proposes as a solution "the doctrine that the Father depends for existence on the Son and Holy Spirit, the Son depends for existence on the Father and Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit depends for existence on the Father and the Son."[17] In this way he replaces the one-sided derivation of Son and Spirit from the Father, postulated by the doctrine of processions, with a mutual dependence. But what sort of dependence is this? It cannot be causal dependence, according to Yandell, because the essential divine attribute of aseity is the property, *existing without being caused by anything else.* If the Persons are caused to exist by each other, then none of them exists *a se*, as Yandell insists that they must. The dependence, then, must be logical rather than causal. But it is difficult to see how this can work. If the Son's existence logically presupposes the Father's existence, then the Father's existence must be logically prior to that of the Son. But then, since the dependence relation goes both ways, it follows that the Father's existence logically presupposes the Son's existence, and so it seems that it must be the Son's existence that is logically prior — but obviously, both cannot be true. Perhaps, then, what is necessary is the entire complex of Father plus Son plus Holy Spirit. That is to say:

(N1) Necessarily, (Father + Son + Holy Spirit) exists.

This situation, however, is logically indistinguishable from the following:

(N2) Necessarily, the Father exists, *and,*

(N3) Necessarily, the Son exists, *and,*

(N4) Necessarily, the Holy Spirit exists.[18]

16 For an expanded version of this argument, see Hasker, *Tri-Personal God*, 158–61.

17 Keith Yandell, review of my *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, available at *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews,* http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/48755-metaphysics-and-the-tri-personal-god/

18 Yandell affirms (N2)–(N4) in "The Most Brutal and Inexcusable Error", 204.

Indeed, (N1)–(N4) seems to be precisely what Yandell has in mind; in a more recent article, he leans heavily on the claim that the Trinity is a "logically inseparable triad" as guaranteeing the divine unity.[19] Contrary to what Yandell seems to think, however, (N1)–(N4) *completely fails* to secure any meaningful dependence relationship between the three divine Persons. Nothing whatever can exist if a necessary being fails to exist: If the number 37 is a necessary being, then it is impossible that you or I should exist and that number fail to exist — but this, of course, says nothing whatever about any meaningful dependence relation between each of us and that number. Indeed, the number 37, the mean distance between the earth and Mars, and the smell of avocado form a logically inseparable triad! (Even if there were no planets or avocados, the properties in question arguably are necessary existing abstract objects.) Similarly, (N1)–(N4) are consistent with the proposition that each of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is an ultimate source of being; each possesses a necessity that is in no way derived from any other being, and whatever further relationships may exist between them are subsequent to the existence of each person. If this is not tritheism, it comes far too close to that for comfort. But if with Yandell we deny the processions, it is hard to see how this conclusion can be avoided.

In the light of these considerations, I think we must conclude that Yandell has not yet shown how he can give an adequate account of the divine unity consistent with his denial of the processions. Furthermore, the Yandellian view has very little claim to biblical support — something that (as I will argue) is not true of the Nicene view.

The History of Doctrine Problem

The other area of significant difficulty for the no-processions view concerns the history of Christian doctrine. Now, it is beyond question that the idea of processions — more generally, the notion that the Son and the Holy Spirit are somehow ontologically derived from the Father — played an absolutely central role in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, from the second century on. The question is, what should be made of this fact? For an orthodox trinitarian, who affirms the doctrine of processions, there is no problem. Such a trinitarian, mindful of the promise that the Spirit will guide

19 Keith E. Yandell, "The Doctrine of the Trinity: Consistent and Coherent", in *Building on the Founda-tions of Evangelical Theology: Essays in Honor of John S. Feinberg*, ed. Gregg R. Allison and Stephen J. Wellum (Crossway, 2015), 162.

the disciples into the truth (John 16:13), will suppose that the doctrine of the Trinity is an example of this guidance, through which, in spite of many twists and turns, the church arrived at conclusions that are fundamentally sound. On the other hand, the historical development poses no special problem for the trinitarian skeptic, who can write the whole process off as simply another example of metaphysical wrangling in the ancient world. There is a problem, I submit, for the Yandellian trinitarian, one who holds the doctrine of the Trinity to be true for the most part but rejects the doctrine of processions. Is there not something deeply incongruous in the notion that God would lead his church to the truth through a process that was based throughout on a fundamental assumption that was false? Could God not have led his followers to the truth without the inclusion of this massive and damaging error? Or if, due to historical circumstances, the erroneous assumption had to be tolerated for a time, could it not have been outgrown and left to one side, as were various other false starts? In this connection Mullins writes, "I fail to see the force of this providential/ historical argument. If Christian theists are willing to say that God is still providentially in control during the atrocities of the 20th Century, they should not be too bothered by a few unbiblical doctrinal errors along the way" (211, note 87). This misses the point. The issue is not the intrinsic evil of doctrinal error, but the incongruity of attributing the sort of process described specifically to the guidance of the Spirit in leading the church to the truth. This is amplified when Mullins, after pressing the Eunomian argument from aseity and self-sufficiency, surveys several later theologians whose views might provide an escape from that argument. (The list includes Aquinas, Scotus, and Calvin; needless to say, each of their suggestions is found to be unsatisfactory.) For me, the interest of this lies not in the possibility of using their ideas as escape from the Eunomian argument, an escape which I don't think is needed. The interest lies, rather, in the fact that it shows how truly devastating Mullins' position is for our understanding of the history of Christian belief. Remember that the difficulty with the doctrine of processions, according to Mullins, is that it is implicitly Arian; it implies a denial of the full deity of Jesus Christ. We must conclude, then, that all of these "great lights" in the history of Christian doctrine were threatened in this way: Arius may have been shown out the front door, but he has snuck back in through the window left open by the doctrine of processions! And what is true of these theological greats will of course also be true of innumerable

lesser figures, all of whom retained the processions and thus had a potentially fatal error in the heart of their theology. All is not lost, however! In the 20th and early 21st centuries there has arisen a small but valiant band of theologians and philosophers who, at long last, have set things straight and established the doctrine of the Trinity on a solid basis! If the reader of this essay finds this to be a plausible and attractive account of the history of doctrine, she is welcome to embrace it. To me, it seems grotesque.

Mullins responds to this with a *tu quoque.* He argues that "Hasker is subject to his own criticism. As such, Hasker should not hold too tightly to this line of reasoning" (211). In particular, he cites the doctrine of divine simplicity, which I reject (as does Mullins himself), and so he concludes "I maintain that he too should believe that the development of the doctrine of the Trinity proceeded on the back of fundamental mistakes" (212). Mullins has a point here. Anyone dealing with ancient doctrines faces a double challenge: on the one hand, to maintain and defend the truth achieved by the ancient theologians; on the other hand, to state that truth in terms that make it intelligible and, so far as possible, credible in terms of the thought-world of today. Anyone attempting this is open to challenges from both directions: either that too much of the tradition has been lost, or that too much that is obsolete has been retained.

Having said this, I believe there is a qualitative difference between what I have done with divine simplicity, and what Mullins has done with the processions. Simplicity played a role in the development of Trinitarian doctrine, but it is replaceable, and I have suggested how this might be done.[20] Mullins has not shown, and I suspect *could not* show, how the processions could be replaced. In terms of a musical example, my procedure is as if one took an orchestral score and replaced the bassoon part with a tenor saxophone; he, in contrast, is dispensing with the entire string section. Once that has been done, it is difficult to know whether we are still listening to the same composition.

THE CASE FOR THE PROCESSIONS

Finally, we turn to the affirmative case that can be made for the doctrine of processions in God. Over and above the difficulties that result from denying the processions, what positive reasons can we give for affirming the doctrine?

20 See Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 226–45.

Part of that case has already been made in the previous section, in discussing the role of the processions in the development of trinitarian doctrine. At this point a few brief remarks will be made about additional theological merits of the doctrine of processions. Then we will turn to a topic that until now has gone undiscussed: the biblical basis for the doctrine.

Theological Benefits of the Processions

Theologically we may well begin with an idea that Mullins finds incredible: that the processions are precisely what grounds the equality of the divine persons. According to Christopher A. Beeley, "Gregory [Nazianzen] is firmly rejecting the notion that the monarchy of the Father in any way conflicts with the equality of the three persons — on the grounds that it is precisely what brings about that equality."[21] The underlying idea here is one that applies in cases of natural reproduction: Parent organisms pass on to their offspring the entirety of their species-nature. What results from the union of two horses, or frogs, or human beings is, in each case, a horse, a frog, or a human being. The causal priority of the parents in no way implies that they are truer representatives of that common nature than are the offspring. (If this were not the case, life on earth would be in a state of precipitous decline, with each generation inferior to the preceding one.) By the same token, what is passed on in the divine processions is the totality of the divine nature; that is exactly what is meant by *homoousios.* (As noted above, it is historically untenable to claim that *homoousios* means something that is incompatible with the processions.) To be sure, in the normal course of human life a parent is herself the child of her own parents, and her children may in turn become parents. But the very first humans, if there were such, and the very last, if such there will be, are neither less nor more human than all those in between. In a closed group such as the Trinity there must of necessity be a first and a last, but this in no way implies that one is "more divine" than the other. The Father has a special role, as the beginning of the entire process, but then so does the Spirit have a special role as the consummation of the process. Especially if we take the Western view that the Son is involved in the procession of the Holy Spirit, there is a pleasing symmetry: The Father gives life and being but does not, in

21 Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, (OUP, 2008), 209–210.

the first instance, receive it (though he receives much by way of the trinitarian perichoresis). The Spirit receives, but does not give — and the Son both receives from the Father, and gives to the Spirit. None can exist without the other two; the maximal degree of independence belongs, not to the persons individually, but to the Trinity as a whole. In the words of the Athanasian Creed, "in this Trinity there is no before or after, no greater or lesser, but all three persons are equally eternal with each other and fully equal."

The Biblical Case for the Processions

We have briefly expounded the doctrine of processions, and have considered Mullins' main objections to the doctrine. We have also noted the problems created for the Yandellian by denying the processions, both in adequately affirming the unity of God, and in giving a plausible reading of the history of Trinitarian doctrine. And we have reviewed certain theological advantages that flow from the doctrine of processions. Finally, we turn to the topic of biblical support for the doctrine of processions — a topic Mullins does not address at all, in a critique that is twice as long as the chapter he is criticizing! To be sure, one might suppose that little needs to be said because there is little support to be considered. I will show, however, that this is not the case. It is indeed true that one cannot find the doctrine of processions explicitly stated in Scripture. Neither, of course, can we find the doctrine of the Trinity explicitly stated. Any realistic view must accept that this doctrine, together with the doctrine of the incarnation, represents the culmination of centuries of intensive reflection on the biblical data, and not simply a transcribing of that data. But if we ask whether there is anything in Scripture that points to an ontological dependence of the Son on the Father, the answer must be, "Yes, quite a bit."[22]

The belief that the doctrine of processions lacks biblical warrant has drawn much of its inspiration from a 1953 article by Dale Moody, who argued on linguistic grounds that *monogenēs,* traditionally translated as "only begotten" (as in John 3:16), is linguistically related to *genos* ("class or kind") rather than to *gennaō* ("beget"), and thus is correctly translated simply as "only or unique."[23] This seems to be correct on linguistic grounds, though one might wonder

22 I discussed the matter of biblical support in *Tri-Personal God,* 217–17; what is said here adds only a little to that discussion. Giles devotes an entire chapter to the topic; see his *The Eternal Generation of the Son,* 63–90.

23 For a full discussion see ibid., 63–66.

whether ancient writers were always so meticulous in avoiding the association of *monogenēs* with *gennaō*. (We shall return to this point later.) However, the biblical warrant for the doctrine of processions is by no means limited to this one word. The fundamental starting point for the notion of eternal generation is the language of "Father" and "Son", which is pervasive in the New Testament. If the eternal generation of the Son is denied, the Father-Son relationship must be viewed as having its inception with the incarnation. This however is implausible as a reading of some biblical texts; for instance, John 17, where Jesus, self-identified as the Son, refers to "the glory that I had in your presence before the world was made." Consider also Hebrews 1:2, which speaks of "a Son [...] through whom also he created the worlds." Especially pertinent here is John 5:26, a text heavily emphasized by Augustine: "For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself." To *have life in oneself* is most certainly a divine attribute; it is inconceivable that this could be said of a mere creature. And this divine attribute is said to have been "granted" to the Son by the Father. While this text does not directly express the doctrine of eternal generation, it surely points strongly in that direction.[24]

Alongside the Father-Son texts, there are other passages that strongly imply a relation of ontological dependence between Father and Son. The notion of Word, or Reason (however *logos* is best understood) clearly implies such dependence. "Word" and "Reason" are not free-standing entities; a *logos* is the Word or Reason *of someone*. The text from Hebrews cited above continues by saying that the Son is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (NIV); both "radiance" and "representation" imply a relation of dependence.[25] In Colossians 1:15 Christ is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." I would not wish to claim that these passages, together with others cited by Giles, constitute a proof of the doctrine of the processions. They do, I believe, provide significant support, and should give us pause if we are inclined to see the church fathers as systematically mistaken on this important point.

24 For an excellent discussion of this passage, with extensive reference to Augustine, see Keith Johnson, "Augustine, Eternal Generation, and Evangelical Trinitarianism", *Trinity Journal* 32, no. 2 (2011): 147–53.

25 RSV and NRSV have "reflects" or "reflection" rather than "radiance", thus understanding *apaugasma* in a passive rather than an active sense. But a reflection also has a decidedly derivative character.

I mentioned above that it is not certain that *monogenēs* never implies a relationship of begetting between Father and Son. One text that challenges this interpretation is John 1:18, where the best-attested reading is *monogenēs theos*, though some prefer instead the easier reading *monogenēs huios* (Son). If *theos* is accepted, this puts pressure on the interpretation of *monogenēs*. The adjective *monogenēs* must then distinguish *theos* who is the revealer from the unseen *theos* in the first part of the verse—and neither "only" nor "unique" serves that purpose well. F. F. Bruce, who accepts the reading *theos*, translates *monogenēs theos* as "the only-begotten, (himself) God."[26] That is literal and explicit, but the NRSV translators took a different approach. They wished to avoid the now-archaic "begotten", but nevertheless retain the father-son relationship which they found to be expressed in *monogenēs.* Their lovely solution to the problem provides a fitting conclusion for this essay: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

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26 F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 44.

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