

## **Introduction to Reckoning with and Reimagining “the God of the Bible”: A Conversation about “Classical Theism”**

Stephen W. Martin  
The King’s University

### **Abstract**

In a recent article published as a blog post (<https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2022/12/08/gods-eternity-and-relationality-in-the-bible-why-i-am-not-a-classical-theist/>), J. Richard Middleton explains that he does not regard himself as a “classical theist” due to his inability to reconcile traditional philosophical categories describing God’s character with the portrayal of God in Scripture. Middleton explicitly contrasts the biblical portrayal of God’s relationality and adaptability with classic categories of divine simplicity and immutability. The article provoked a great deal of response, demonstrating that debates about how we understand and speak about God in Scripture and theology are far from resolved. This introductory essay expands on the concerns raised in Middleton’s rejection of classical theism, seeking to capture and contextualize them in recent theology sufficient to lay some groundwork for the contributions that follow. These questions range from the narrative in which “classical theism” is situated and its assumptions about the role of cultural, political, and philosophical Hellenization in the consolidation of dogma; the relation between biblical and systematic theology, especially the metaphysical presuppositions, acknowledged and not acknowledged, that underline each discipline; and the more pastoral and apologetic concerns revisionary theism tries to speak into.

---

On December 8, 2022, biblical scholar J. Richard Middleton posted to his blog a reflection titled, “God’s Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist.”<sup>1</sup> It soon became the most viewed post on his blog and

---

1 J. Richard Middleton, “God’s Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist,” *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2023) 1–8.

occasioned a lengthy set of debates on social media. These debates were such that on May 28, 2023 the Canadian-American Theological Association held a special panel discussion featuring Richard and the other contributors to this issue. I was privileged to chair the discussion.<sup>2</sup>

Several important issues emerged from the discussions. I want to capture some of them and expand on them briefly. One concern was the relationship between the language(s) of Scripture, the creeds, and philosophy. While conceding that credal language could help keep interpretation on a faithful path, as “first order discourse” Richard asserted that the language of the Bible was where Christian thinking about God ought to begin. Moreover, it should constitute the critical norm for subsequent credal and philosophical language. By contrast, he continued, classical theism began with a view of God foreign to that of the biblical text and articulated in the language of Greek metaphysics, to which the “metaphorical” discourse of Scripture was subordinated. Moreover, it did this in a framework that ignored the differences between the worldview within which the biblical writers operated and that of Hellenistic philosophy, especially as reflected in the works of Aristotle and Plotinus. In contrast to the biblical worldview, Hellenistic philosophy privileged being over becoming, ideal forms over contingent matter, and eternity over time. Thus, when Scripture spoke of God’s eternity, classical theism understood it to mean timelessness rather than long duration. Likewise, God’s unchanging faithfulness was understood within the framework of metaphysical “impassibility” rather than “covenant[al] fidelity.” Such language, Richard concluded, made the God of classical theism “an idolatrous, philosophical ‘god,’” rather than the God of Israel who became incarnate in Jesus. In short, “the ‘god’ of classical theism is *not* the God of the Bible.”<sup>3</sup>

The latter phrase is reminiscent of Pascal’s famous opposition between “the God of the philosophers” and “the God of Abraham.”<sup>4</sup> By the twentieth century it came to be taken for granted that Hellenism had overturned the original “Jewish” understanding of God after the Apostolic period, and that dogma is “a work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel.”<sup>5</sup> This corruption lay at the root of Christianity’s assimilation to Empire, the displacing of its “transforming vision” of

2 Since Richard Middleton is a friend of many years it feels odd to refer to him with formal language. I will therefore simply call him “Richard.” I would also reiterate that while I have over the past few years moved away from the open theism I learned from him, I continue to treasure his friendship and benefit from his scholarship. Hence my genuine struggle with this topic and desire to open up conversation.

3 Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 3.

4 “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Thy God will be my God.” Pascal, “Memorial,” quoted in David Simpson, “Blaise Pascal (1623–1662),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; <https://iep.utm.edu/pascal-b/>

5 Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, trans. Neil Buchanan (Boston: Little Brown, 1901), 19.

creaturely life from the present to the future,<sup>6</sup> and the shifting of the locus of eschatological hope from earth to heaven.

The account of how we came to worship this idolatrous “God” is reiterated in an appendix to Richard’s 2014 work, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*.<sup>7</sup> The God of the (Greek) philosophers was a God beyond change, beyond movement, beyond intervention. Not all postapostolic writers went as far as Origen in reinterpreting the biblical language of creation, fall, and redemption of creation as the ascent of the soul to the highest heaven, its ultimate destiny.<sup>8</sup> But the seeds for a radical shift both in the way the Bible was read and how the relationship between God and creation was conceived were planted early on. While very “earthy,” millennial images could be found in works like “The Epistle of Barnabas,” was the *ultimate* destiny of redeemed humanity in a material world created by an “immaterial” God? And was that destiny in *continuity* or *discontinuity* with the original, biblical task of humans to work the creation—a task situated in time in the six days of Genesis? Richard finds much ambiguity in the first three centuries.<sup>9</sup> Otherworldly contemplation of a transcendent divinity beyond time, who was disinterested in or even alienated from creation, eventually replaced the transformation of creation as human destiny. St. Augustine’s Neoplatonism resolved, at least for him, the tensions between biblical theology and Greek philosophy, but at the expense of the holiness of this world and the care of God for it. The

---

6 Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984). This book was revolutionary when I first read it nearly forty years ago. Its analysis is situated within the Reformational, or neo-Kuyperian, tradition associated with the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. At its heart is a reading of history that opposes “the biblical” (identified with “creation, fall, and redemption”) to the Greek “dualist” (form over matter) and the medieval “synthesist” (grace over nature) worldviews. For these categories, see Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, John Kraay, transl. (Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1979). The Protestant Reformation represented a return to the biblical view, on this reading, and opens the possibility of a truly Christian philosophical framework, something that only began to be truly realized in the neo-Calvinist revival in the Netherlands associated with Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper in the nineteenth century and transmitted to North America (and Toronto) in the twentieth century.

It is arguable that “creation, fall, redemption” (a.k.a. “the biblical view”) itself became formulaic in Reformational thought, and one of Richard’s most important contributions from *The Transforming Vision* onward has been to give it exegetical nuance and texture.

7 J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 283–312. Space does not permit a detailed comparison of the story of the fall of Christian thought between its articulation in *The Transforming Vision* and in *A New Heaven*, but it would be interesting to consider, as it would be to compare these works to the story told in Reformational thought more generally.

8 Middleton, *A New Heaven*, 284–86. The key ideas that mark the difference between the Platonist Christianity of Origen and fidelity to the biblical vision are the resurrection of the body and the idea of an earthly eschatological hope.

9 Middleton, *A New Heaven*, 287–91.

theology that followed into the Middle Ages was “dualistic” at worst and “synthetic” at best. The God of the philosophers had won.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, we have a story of how “a traditional understanding of God” displaced the biblical view. It is the explanation for why Richard says he is “not a classical theist” in his original post. Classical theism reflects a corruption stretching “from the Patristic period through to Modern times.” The God thus conceived is “atemporal” (outside of time) and “simple” (“unaffected by the world or anything outside of himself”).<sup>11</sup> Because this “traditional understanding,” this classical theism, is nothing less than a falling away from the biblical view of God and creation, for most of the church’s history its reading of the Bible and its consequent understanding of God have been distorted. It is only with modern biblical scholarship and its reading of the biblical text on its own terms, in its own ancient Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman context, that this view has been challenged. Historical-critical scholarship is able to clear away the dogmatic detritus of nearly two thousand years, allowing us to see how radical the Bible’s picture of God really is compared to the conventional one we have inherited. The challenge to the traditional understanding, I would add, has been bolstered by the post-Heideggerian deconstruction of any and all metaphysics as “ontotheology.” The true, biblical God—and the renewal of Christian witness—lies on the other side of this deconstruction.<sup>12</sup>

From the mid-twentieth century, a parallel set of debates has taken place in systematic theology, especially about divine aseity and impassibility: whether God is complete “in Godself,” capable of change through being affected externally, and, by extension, capable of suffering. While there are early twentieth century precursors, including the process theism influenced by Alfred North Whitehead, the experience of the *Shoah* and its impact on theodicy has been a key

---

10 Augustine also functions as a kind of boundary figure in *The transforming vision*, though I think Richard’s treatment in *A New Heaven* is more generous in recognizing him as both biblical and Neoplatonist. But I think Richard would still maintain that Augustine gave Greek dualism its “ultimate theological legitimation” and “set the pattern for medieval thought and culture” (Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 110). While there are acknowledged differences between Augustine and Aquinas, this pattern remains as “compromise . . . a plague that still afflicts us.” Their legacy “distorts our reading of The Scriptures and hampers our lives of obedience.” (Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 113). While Richard finds a bit more “ambiguity” in some currents of medieval thought in *A New Heaven* (see 293–96), these are exceptions that prove the rule and the overall picture remains of a lost vision until the modern world.

11 Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 4.

12 In his further reading section, Middleton singles out Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). For Richard’s own engagement with a post-metaphysical and deconstructive picture of “reality,” see J. Richard Middleton, and Brian J. Walsh. *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995). It is important to state that while Walsh and Middleton affirm the deconstruction of classical and modernist metaphysics as ideology critique, they are nuanced in the way they appropriate it in their reading of Scripture.

catalyst.<sup>13</sup> In the memorable phrase of Bonhoeffer, “Only the suffering God can help.”<sup>14</sup> Only a God who suffers-with God’s creation, a God who is profoundly affected by God’s creation, can speak to the modern world. As Brian Walsh put it in a comment on Richard’s original post, just as we need “to repent of heaven” so now “we need to repent of the eternal/atemporal, immutable and impassable God!”

Debates about such “repentance” have been ongoing in the evangelical world. To some extent, they have tended to map on to older questions about predestination and divine providence, though there are classical theists numbered among Arminians and challenges to classical theism coming from orthodox Calvinists and other theologians influenced by Karl Barth.<sup>15</sup> Readers might recall the controversy about open theism at the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) around the turn of this century sparked by Clark Pinnock’s *The Openness of God* and *Most Moved Mover*.<sup>16</sup> Building on this, significant works by Gregory Boyd and others followed, along with more controversy. While ETS condemned open theism and declared it beyond the pale for evangelicals committed to the authority of Scripture,<sup>17</sup> revisionist currents among theologians with otherwise evangelical sentiments remain strong. Perhaps the best representative of such among systematic theologians is Thomas Jay Oord. Oord is especially interested in relating a processive ontology to contemporary accounts in the natural sciences, but also with deeply pastoral concerns in mind.<sup>18</sup> But there has been pushback too, also with a pastoral spirit. Theologian Todd Billings writes movingly about how the doctrine of divine impassibility was a far greater comfort during his cancer treatments than

---

13 For a concise and lucid overview, see Richard Bauckham, “‘Only the Suffering God Can Help’: Divine Impassibility in Modern Theology,” *Themelios* 9, no. 3 (1984) 6-12.

14 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 479.

15 For examples, see Roger E. Olson, “Is Open Theism a Type of Arminianism,” *Roger E. Olson: My Evangelical Arminian Theological Musings* (2012), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogere-olson/2012/11/is-open-theism-a-type-of-arminianism/>; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Colin E. Gunton, *Act and being: Towards a theology of the divine attributes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) respectively.

16 Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994); Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Gregory A. Boyd, *Is God to Blame? Moving beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

17 Jeff Robinson, “Is Open Theism Still a Factor 10 Years after ETS Vote?” *The Gospel Coalition* (2014); <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-open-theism-still-a-factor-10-years-after-ets-vote/>

18 For example, Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015). Not all open theists embrace process metaphysics, as Richard rightly points out in his post. See also D. Stephen Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God: Aquinas and his Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 201-3.

the assurance that God was “suffering-with” him.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, one begins to wonder precisely *how* the suffering God helps.

While earlier defenses of classical theism in the evangelical world tended to be reactionary,<sup>20</sup> recent philosophical and systematic theology has mounted fresh challenges to the assumption that the God revealed in Scripture is radically different from that of Origen, Augustine, or Aquinas. There is a growing consensus agreeing with Jaroslav Pelikan that the development of doctrine in the patristic period represents a “de-Hellenization” rather than a capitulation to Hellenism,<sup>21</sup> or perhaps “the Christianization of Hellenism,” as historian Robert Louis Wilken puts it. While Wilken acknowledges in early Christianity “patterns of thought and conceptions rooted in Greco-Roman culture” those patterns are transformed “so profoundly that in the end something quite new came into being.” This “something new” represents the bold extension of the biblical vision into a new context rather than its abandonment. With others, Wilken boldly urges that it now is time “to bid a fond farewell” to the Harnack thesis.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, recent works have displayed the constructive possibilities of a classical understanding to address contemporary questions, including the question of suffering. Like open theism, these works span the confessional world, including the Reformed, the Wesleyan and Methodist, the Anglican, the Roman Catholic, and the Eastern Orthodox.<sup>23</sup> Instead of a supplement to the Hellenization narrative wherein modern biblical scholarship recovers the original, non-metaphysical view of God in

19 J. Todd Billings, “Undying Love,” *First Things* (December, 2014); <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/12/undying-love>. See also J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).

20 John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth, *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson, *God under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

21 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 55.

22 Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xvi–xvii. I’m tempted to ask whether this does not parallel what Walsh and Middleton did with deconstruction in *Truth is Stranger*.

23 For examples, see Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology 30 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015); Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God*; Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004). The retrieval of classical theism and metaphysics by women scholars such as Sonderegger is especially notable for challenging the assumption that classical theism and patriarchy are necessarily linked. See also Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001); Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Janet Martin Soskice, *Naming God: Addressing the Divine in Philosophy, Theology and Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). Parallel to this is the dismantling of the idea that a traditional view of God results in “pat answers” to the experience of suffering. See Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament* for one example.

Scripture, these and other works claim that such scholarship has actually distorted the reading of Scripture through a “flattened-out” historicism.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it has smuggled in a distinctively *modern* metaphysics. Scripture becomes one “text” alongside others. It may remain the Supreme Text among lesser texts, but it is understandable (and criticisable) on the same terms as lesser texts.<sup>25</sup>

This modern placing of Scripture as one text among many is paralleled in the modern metaphysic that positions God and creation in competition, a kind of zero-sum game alternating between the extremes of divine-human synergism on the one hand and hegemony of divine power over human agency on the other. This is a distinctively modern problem that requires a retrieval of the tradition that was lost, a tradition in which it was possible to consider creator and creation non-competitively.<sup>26</sup> One of the leading voices of this retrieval is that of Rowan Williams, who reminds us that, on both a classical and biblical view, God is not “one among others” and therefore not “an object competing for attention.”<sup>27</sup> This makes better sense of the overall biblical narrative that envisions God as “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). It also makes better sense, continues Williams, of “Israel’s God as . . . the one who gives regular, coherent, continuous unity to the distinctive life of this community” rather than one character in Israel’s story.<sup>28</sup> The ultimate logic, says Williams, is Christological:

God is not “in” Jesus as an element in his biography, but as what the entire biography expresses, transcribes or communicates. The divine life which is eternally realised in the Logos is not an overwhelmingly important dimension of Jesus’s life, but the deepest source of that life’s meaning in all the actuality of its historical and narrative detail. Thus, both the action and the passion of this life are held together as one coherent phenomenon by, ultimately, the act of God; and the presence of that act in the history of Jesus of Nazareth is not an element or moment alongside the contingencies of the history. It is the point

24 See especially Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

25 It is also worth acknowledging here a new reading of Aquinas as a biblical theologian, particularly the relationship between *sacra doctrina* and *sacra pagina*. See Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*; Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*. This is a constructive project of Levering’s especially, but also of other “biblical Thomists.” For a survey, see Sławomir Zatywardnicki, “What Place Does Scripture Have in Thomas Aquinas’s Reasoning,” *Collectanea Theologica* 94, no.1 (2024) 107–66.

26 The proto-text of such a retrieval is John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, rev. ed. (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

27 Rowan Williams, “God,” in *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. David Ford, Ben Quash, and Janet Martin Soskice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 78, 77. Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory* contains an acknowledgement “to Williams, who taught me theology.” Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, viii.

28 Williams, “God,” 77.



that is laboriously clarified in the Christological debates of the early Christian centuries and remains a focal theme in the Christology of high scholasticism.<sup>29</sup>

There is much to be harvested from Williams's work both for perennial questions about religious and philosophical language and for prophetic questions that speak into the debates peculiar to our time. In his contribution to this symposium, Patrick Franklin proposes such an engagement with Richard's concerns as a backdrop. With special regard to *Christ the Heart of Creation*, he argues that Williams would be sympathetic to much of what Richard expresses about divine relationality and reciprocity in the biblical picture of God. But rather than dispensing with classical theism, Williams claims that classical theism both "frames" and "safeguards" a biblical view while acknowledging that God can never be reduced to or confined within a single metaphor—including "relationality" as we understand it. Finally, he returns to Richard's more pastoral and indeed missional concerns.

Biblical Thomists follow a similar line of defense in acquitting Aquinas of charges of idolatry. It is precisely a non-competitive metaphysics that follows the biblical prescription to worship the one true God—a non-competitive metaphysics that makes theological sense of the central theophany of the Old Testament, the burning bush of Exodus 3.<sup>30</sup> With this in mind, it is important to understand the specific contexts of the terms used by figures in the tradition of classical theism, especially Aquinas. Terms such as "aseity," "simplicity," and "immutability" should indeed be critically assessed, not in view of how they sound to modern ears but rather how they functioned amidst the questions of Thomas's own time. What *were* the questions Thomas was addressing in his context to which these concepts provided the answer? How did he not only "use" but also "extend and deepen" the tradition he received? In his contribution, Joshua Harris claims how understanding Thomas in his context can help mitigate accusations such as Richard's about the "idolatrous, philosophical 'god.'"<sup>31</sup> Harris also brings us back to the first question, about metaphor and the crucial link between biblical language and philosophical discourse. It is not that Thomas supplants biblical metaphor with philosophical speculation, as if the latter is more "true." Rather, Thomas claims that scriptural metaphor provides the very grounding for philosophical

29 Williams, "God," 79. In *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), Williams focuses on how the entire tradition of Christian thinking about God and creation—from St. Paul to Thomas, from Luther to Barth to today—is a response to "the exceptional linguistic eccentricity" of the way Jesus is spoken about in the New Testament. Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 47.

30 Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*. For interaction with modern exegesis of Exod 3:14 from a perspective that similarly insists on divine simplicity as hermeneutic, see Jonathan M. Platter, "Divine Simplicity and Scripture: A Theological Reading of Exodus 3:14," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73, no. 4 (2020) 295–306.

31 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 4.



language that is faithful to revelation. Thus, we can identify “immutability” and other such terms as “biblical.”

The modern gulf between systematic theology and biblical studies is being challenged in other ways as well, though not always through a rehabilitation or retrieving of classical theism. Like Richard, Robert Jenson rejects classical metaphysics in favour of the story of Scripture as fundamental theology. However, in so doing Jenson does not reject metaphysics *per se*. Nor does he subject the classical tradition to the same kind of criticism as those who work within the “betrayal of the biblical witness” story. Rather, he proposes a “revisionary metaphysics” (strange as that sounds) that seeks to capture the God-world relationship and the relationship of the divine persons in narrative terms.<sup>32</sup> This would seem to be akin to Williams, who similarly understands the revelation of God as story—though he would stop well short of Jenson’s simple identification of the way “the eternal Logos . . . simply *is* the one who appears to us as Son of God in the scriptural narrative.”<sup>33</sup> This fails to do justice, Williams counters, to biblical language that respects *both* the integrity of the second Person of the Trinity *and* the human Jesus. But Jenson likely would counter by taking distance from residual “classical” elements in Williams, such as insisting that the triune life of God is complete in itself, as “being” apart from creation which nevertheless determines to create.

Unlike that of classical theism, Jenson’s “revisionist metaphysics” is dynamic, oriented as it is to God as eternally “happening”-in-relation, rather than as static “being.” Reflecting Barth’s trinitarian criticism of Aquinas, Jenson insists that *de deo trino* is more fundamental than *de deo uno*.<sup>34</sup> This is because the God-world relation involves a kind of participation, but participation in a drama that is not simply creation’s story but the story of the triune God. This story is the unfolding of God’s eternal decision, to invoke Barth again, to be nothing other than for us in Jesus Christ. Again, Christology bears the burden of metaphysical load, but in a way different to that of Williams.<sup>35</sup> In his contribution to this symposium, Charles Meeks argues that Jenson’s narrative frame not only offers a twist on the idea of divine simplicity (that God’s act and God’s being are one) but opens up space to engage some of the concerns put forward by Richard. More significant, in my view, is Meeks’s Jenson-inspired attempt to think the God-world relation in sacramental terms, especially in terms of the Eucharist. A theology that begins and

32 Robert W. Jenson, *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

33 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 159.

34 This is also a strong difference with Sonderegger’s work, who insists on the priority of *de deo uno* and the relativizing of Christology as starting point. “A repeated refrain in this work must be that not all is Christology!” Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vii.

35 For Williams’s critical interaction with Jenson, see Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 157–61.

ends with the bread and wine of communion is something that brings together the concerns not only Williams and Jenson, but Aquinas and perhaps even Richard Middleton.

There can be no question that when Richard Middleton composed his blog post for December 8, 2022, he did not intend it to become the subject of a symposium at the Canadian American Theological Association (CATA), much less placed under the scrutiny of the readers of this journal. But the nerve it touched and the discussion it provoked invited this kind of formal treatment. To be fair to the informality of the original post, Richard is given the last, formal word. With all the other contributors I wish to express deepest thanks to him for being willing to engage their responses, both at the CATA conference in 2023 and here in this journal.