

Trinitarian Virtues of Relationality
 Elizabeth Lee
 Open and Relational Theologies, AAR 2009

The 20th century saw a renewed interest in both virtue ethics and trinitarian theology. The reemergence of virtue ethics has given Christian ethicists fresh perspectives on the moral life. Some have focused on the writings of Thomas Aquinas, offering a more flexible interpretation of natural law and a more explicit focus on the role of love and friendship in his work.¹ Others have turned more directly to the Gospels and the life of Jesus as inspiration for Christian virtue ethics.² These thinkers have been part of an effort to find a more inductive, experiential, and practical understanding of the Christian moral life and have begun to bridge the gap between spirituality, theology, and ethics.

Trinitarian theology, too, has enjoyed renewed attention. Theologians have sought to make this “peculiar, rationalistic albatross of a doctrine”³ more relevant and understandable. Many have stressed the relational nature of a triune God and have shown how the Trinity has implications both for our social systems and personal lives. As theology in general has continued to evolve new branches—liberation, feminist, process, etc—so too has trinitarian theology. Recent contributions to trinitarian theology have, in dialogue with aspects of the Christian tradition, offered new God-language and have offered creative, meaningful interpretations of the doctrine.

Despite the renewals in these areas, not many thinkers have begun to put virtue ethics and trinitarian theology in dialogue. Although some Christian virtue ethicists have pointed to the

¹ Here I have in mind Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason* and Paul Wadell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Aquinas*.

²

Here I have in mind, among others, Joseph Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* and William Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*.

³

Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 169.

Trinity as a model for human relationality, these discussions have tended to be cursory. Because God is a community of persons in loving relationship, the argument goes, we believe that to be created in the image of God is for us also to be essentially social and relational.⁴ This paper will draw from two recent interpretations of the Trinity to pull out further implications for virtue ethics. I hope to show how images of divine triune relationality can in turn offer virtues for human relationality—to show not simply *that* humans are relational but to suggest *how* we can and ought to relate. I begin with a brief overview of virtue ethics. I then examine the interpretations of the Trinity in the work of Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine Keller, noting the anthropological implications of their trinitarian images and proposing one virtue that each image of God may encourage in humans.⁵ Finally, I will show how these virtues can help shape human relationships at four levels—with ourselves, others, God, and the world.

First, what is virtue ethics? Joseph Kotva defines virtue ethics as that which “deals with the transition from who we are to who we could be.”⁶ That is, virtue ethics aims to help us become a certain sort of person. Any virtue ethic can be said to consist of three parts—a picture of who we are now, a picture of who we want to become, and a set of virtues that will help us get from one to the other. A virtue can be defined as a good character trait that we acquire through practice. For most Christian virtue ethicists, the *telos*, or goal—who we want to become—is to reflect more fully the image of God in our actions and relationships. Most virtue theorists have turned to the life of Jesus as inspiration for the virtues that will move us closer to God. By

⁴

For examples of treatment of the Trinity, see Richard Gula *The Call to Holiness*, 103 and 133-136; James Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics*, 85; Paul Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 79, 197.

⁵

Here I define “virtue” simply as a characteristic of God that humans can and ought to embody

⁶ Joseph Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 17.

developing the characteristics Jesus embodied, they argue, such as forgiveness or compassion, we begin to reflect more fully the image of God. Christian virtue ethicists have only recently begun to look at understandings of the Trinity to learn more about who we are and who we want to become. To further the conversation between trinitarian theology and virtue ethics, in the following section I will look at the images of the Trinity in the work of Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine Keller, asking what implication these images have for how we understand ourselves and who we want to become.⁷

We begin with Elizabeth Johnson, who names in female terms the God who “enlivens, suffers with, sustains, and enfolds the universe.”⁸ Not satisfied with attempts to describe a few feminine characteristics in a generally masculine God, to pose the Holy Spirit as the ‘female’ member of the Trinity, or to switch paradigms to an earth-goddess, Johnson offers an understanding of the Trinity—She Who Is—as a fully feminine alternative to the dominant masculine model. The traditional formulation—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—she argues, has become literalized, hegemonic, and too closely associates God with maleness; this symbol excludes women from claiming full ownership of their identity as *imago Dei*. Johnson’s symbol of She Who Is aims to recover the dignity of women as created in the image of God.

Johnson begins with Spirit-Sophia, who is God’s personal engagement with and empowering presence in the world. Spirit-Sophia is everywhere, always drawing near and passing by, providing a healing and encouraging presence in a conflictual world.

Next comes Jesus-Sophia, whose humiliating death on a cross overturns patriarchal understandings of masculinity. Johnson notes that Jesus’ maleness belongs to his historical

⁷ Here I am interested primarily in the images of God found in Johnson’s *She Who Is*, and Keller’s *Face of the Deep*. I will not address their larger constructive projects, unless it is relevant.

⁸ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 13.

identity—that is, his human identity, and not to his divine one; Jesus’ maleness is an accidental characteristic and is not essential to his “redeeming christic identity.”⁹ The misplacement of Jesus’ maleness into his divine redemptive function excludes women from full participation in the church and in the *imago Dei* simply because the physical make up of their bodies is not like Jesus’. What Jesus-Sophia represents is not exclusion or domination or maleness, but “otherness that freely draws near, bringing new life, sustaining all loves.”¹⁰

Finally, Johnson turns to Mother-Sophia, the creative, life-giving force of all that exists. The metaphor of mother, she argues, is associated with our early experiences of comfort, play, discovery, nurture, love, and security. The metaphor of mother also suggests a close relationship between God and the world, as if we are all enfolded in Her womb. Whereas the image of “Father” has become literalized and can serve to perpetuate patriarchy, Johnson argues, the image of God as Mother opens up fresh ways of understanding God’s compassionate, creative power.

So here we have Johnson’s Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia—She Who Is—as a feminine symbol of God that allows women full participation in the *imago Dei*. For Johnson, only when women have found an image of God such as this, to which they can relate and in which they can see themselves, will they be able to truly flourish.

What can Johnson’s trinitarian theology tell us about ourselves? In her own words, “only a community of equals related in profound mutuality, only a community pouring itself out for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, corresponds to the triune symbol.”¹¹ Her mothering,

9

Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 151.

10

Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 169.

11

Elizabeth Johnson, ‘Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again’, *Theology Today* 54 no. 3 (1997), p. 311.

nurturing, ever-present God reminds us that we have come forth from God and that we daily depend on God's grace and compassion. That She Who Is birthed the whole universe reminds us of our kinship with the earth and all of its creatures; we owe respect not only to each other, but also to every other created thing, born as we are of the same God. Finally, her symbol of She Who Is reminds us that all of us—male and female—are equal in our dignity as creatures made in the image of God.

I suggest that Johnson's image of She Who Is can encourage in us the virtue of self-esteem. By recovering feminine interpretations of God, Johnson emphasizes that fact that women—not just men—are created in the image of God. Because, for Johnson, “the symbol of God functions”¹² as the ultimate reference point for how we understand the world and ourselves, a fully feminine symbol encourages women to see in themselves the image of God. Johnson's symbol of God invites women to consciously practice the virtue of self-esteem—to work on re-shaping a more positive self-image; to know that we are whole and good and lovable; to know that through care and compassion we have the power to bring about a more just society; to cultivate a constant awareness of our likeness to God.

Another contemporary trinitarian voice is Catherine Keller. In *Face of the Deep*, Keller reconsiders the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, suggesting instead a creation out of the primal chaos, or *tehom*. In Keller's thought we find not an omnipotent God who creates simply with a snap of the fingers, but a God of interdependence, always already engaged with the world in an “endless process of becoming.”¹³ Keller names *Tehom*, the Depth of God and the matrix of possibility, as the first member of a Trinity of folds. This Depth, “ocean of divinity, womb and

12

Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 4.

13

Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xvii.

place-holder of beginnings.”¹⁴ is that which folds the world into God. The second member is the Difference of God, that which unfolds continually into the world, ever revealing God in an “incipient incarnation, at the edge of the waters.”¹⁵ Thus, Depth as God enfolding all, and Difference as God unfolding into all.

The third member of Keller’s Trinity, the Spirit of God, is the relation of relations, “the dynamism of relation itself within a universe in which nothing is what it is in abstraction from the matrix of relations.”¹⁶ The Spirit, not transcending difference but connecting through it, suggests not only a divine interdependency but also the interdependence of creator and creation, and of all creatures. Keller’s tehomitic Trinity—the Depth, the Difference, and the Spirit—is involved in the world in a continual process of creative, relational becoming. This Trinity, whose members “take their divinity with a grain of salt,”¹⁷ thus emphasizes interdependence, openness, and creativity, and suggests a theology “in which chaos replaces the nihil and in which flux, carefully mediated by forms of stability, permanence and order, remains primary.”¹⁸

What can Keller’s reflections on the Trinity tell us about ourselves? Keller’s tehomitic Trinity is one who creates in the midst of chaos, who both unfolds into the world and enfolds the world back into itself; if we are in the image of this God, we will do well to recognize our own interdependence—both with each other and with the created world—and we will accept the fact that our lives are messy and chaotic. Keller’s Trinity sits with ambiguity and creates out of it; so

¹⁴

Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 231

¹⁵

Keller, *Face of the Deep*, p. 232.

¹⁶

Catherine Keller, “Burning Tongues: A Feminist Trinitarian Epistemology,” in *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 234.

¹⁷

Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 238

¹⁸

Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 218.

should we. In fact, it is only within the chaos—the Deep—that creation is possible at all; God creates “not ‘out of nothing’ but ‘in the midst of everything.’”¹⁹ Keller’s tehomic Trinity confronts us with the ‘deep’ in our own lives, calling us to engage it and to create out of it, all the while reminding us that “we are always in over our heads.”²⁰

I suggest that Keller’s tehomic Trinity can encourage in us the virtue of what I will call “letting-be.”²¹ The person who “lets-be” resists the temptation to impose order or to be in control. In the beginning of *Face of the Deep*, Keller asks, “What might happen if we ceased to fight, if we let the undertow draw us toward the depths?”²² The person cultivating the virtue of “letting-be” does just this, accepting ambiguity and recognizing her finitude and relative powerlessness in the face of many of life’s situations. “Letting-be” does not, however, imply passivity, hopelessness, or apathy; this virtue encourages does encourage action—but the action is within chaos, and not against it. As Keller notes, “the trick is to make ourselves at home within uncertainty.”²³ Her Trinity engages the chaos, embraces the messiness, and creates something beautiful out of it; the virtue of “letting-be” encourages in us the same “tehomophilia”²⁴—creativity within chaos.

As I mentioned above, virtues help us transition from who we are to who we could be, which for Christians means, essentially, to become more like God. In the next section, I will

¹⁹

Keller, “Burning Tongues,” 228.

²⁰

Catherine Keller, *On The Mystery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 54.

²¹

“Letting be” is admittedly an awkward name for a virtue, but I cannot think of a better term. I have considered a few others—becoming, interdependence, depth, openness, brooding, fluidity—but none seems to quite capture what I mean.

²²

Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xvi.

²³

Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 194.

²⁴

Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 36.

offer a sketch of how the trinitarian virtues I named—self-esteem from Johnson and “letting-be” from Keller—can shape our relationships in ways that will enable us to more fully reflect the image of God. I explore how these virtues can affect our relationships at four levels—with ourselves, others, the world, and God.

First, at the level of self-relating, the virtue of self-esteem enables us to have a better self-image and to present that image to others confidently. This virtue encourages us to be confident in our abilities, to be proud of our differences, and to share our gifts with others. The virtue of “letting-be” may enable us to be gentler with ourselves and to recognize our limitations. Keller notes that “we may feel shame before the chaos in our lives, families, sexualities, movements, ethnicities, drafts, projects. Or we may read this difficult milieu for its freshly emerging order.”²⁵ The virtue of “letting-be” encourages us to be at home in the messiness and uncertainties of our lives, in our unfinished business, and to see our vulnerabilities and limitations as the very possibility for creativity. As Dorothy Day once noted, we must learn to look on disorder “with a humble serenity, not minding what the neighbors will say.”²⁶

Second, at the level of relating to others, the virtue of self-esteem will enable us to relate to others on equal terms, neither feeling inadequate nor feeling the anxious need to dominate. On a broader scale, self-esteem may turn into the pursuit of justice; our own self-confidence may prompt us to work to bring about conditions in which others too can feel self-confident. As Johnson notes, our own “exuberant dignity” calls us “to be creative, self-expressive, and loving together in ways that address human brokenness, violence, and the destruction of the earth.”²⁷

The virtue of “letting-be,” when cultivated in our relationships with other people, will enable us

²⁵

Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 226.

²⁶

Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage*, 114

²⁷

Johnson, *She Who Is*, 215.

to take others as they are and to be comfortable with ambiguity or awkwardness in our relationships. This virtue may also encourage us to let go of our need to categorize people or to define what is human or “normal” too narrowly. Cultivating the virtue of “letting-be” might, in Judith Butler’s words, allow us to learn “to feel the surety of one’s epistemological and ontological anchor go...to learn to live and to embrace the destruction and rearticulation of the human in the name of a more capacious and, finally, less violent world, not knowing in advance what precise form our humanness will take.”²⁸ The virtue of “letting be,” in other words, allows space for others’ becoming.

Third, at the level of our relationship to the earth, the virtue of self-esteem, grounded in the understanding that God not only made *us* good, but *all things* good, will call us to respect the earth as God’s beautiful creation. Further, as a notable scholar once said, “We are livin’ in a material world, and I am a material girl.” What Madonna does not tell us, though, is that being a material girl may be a result of low self-esteem. A recent study examined self-esteem and the desire for material goods in adolescents, and found that the two have a causal relationship: low self-esteem leads to increased materialism, and vice versa. The teenagers in the study “turned to material possessions as a coping strategy for low self-worth.”²⁹ If this study is accurate, then it stands to reason the *higher* self-esteem will curb the desire for unnecessary goods. Because widespread materialism must have some environmental costs—misuse or waste of resources, etc—by curbing the materialistic impulse, the virtue of self-esteem thus indirectly affects our relationship with the earth: higher self-esteem leads to less desire for unnecessary material

²⁸

Judith Butler, “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” in *Undoing Gender*, 35.

²⁹

Chaplin, Lan Nguyen and Deborah John. “Growing Up in a Material World: Age Differences in Materialism in Children and Adolescents” in *The Journal of Consumer Research* 34:4 (Dec 2007), 480-93.

goods, which in turn eases the strain on the environment. The virtue of “letting-be” will remind us of our interdependence with the earth and its other creatures. God, earth, and humans are all bound up with one another, and harm to one means harm to them all.

Finally, in our relationship with God, the virtue of self-esteem will allow us to challenge oppressive images of God and to relate to God as something more than dependent children. Confident in God’s love for us, we can let go of our fear of God and see that God takes us and loves us just as we are. With self-esteem comes the recognition of God’s own esteem for us. Cultivating the virtue of “letting be” will enable us to let go of our need to define who or what God is and learn to relate to God as a mystery. As U2 has sung it, “But while I’m getting over certainty / Stop helping God across the road like a little old lady;”³⁰ God does not need our boxes or our definitions. The virtue of “letting-be” will encourage us to seek God in the messiness of our everyday lives and will allow us to be more comfortable with God’s ultimate unknowability.

Our images of God can have a profound impact on how we understand ourselves and can help shape a picture of who we want to become. Learning to feel empowered by Johnson’s *She Who Is* and to embrace the “monstrously untidy creativity”³¹ of Keller’s *tehomoc Trinity* will enable Christians to build better relationships with themselves, others, God, and the earth and thus to participate more fully in the image of God.³² One major task of theological ethics is to point out the implications of religious imagery and rituals for our moral lives—to show how our experiences and understandings of God shape the kinds of people we want to become. In this

³⁰

U2, “Stand Up Comedy” on *No Line on the Horizon*, 2009.

³¹

Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 90.

³²

It might be interesting to compare “letting be” and self-esteem to Thomas Aquinas’s complementary virtues of humility and magnanimity.

paper, I hope to have contributed to this ethical reflection on theology. The richness in the symbol of the Trinity gives us much to think about. In exploring the works of Johnson and Keller, I hope to have offered a small step along the way to a more explicitly trinitarian picture of the Christian moral life. I hope virtue ethicists continue to explore the ways in which our images of a relational God can give insight and direction to our own relationality.