God's time, our time: An interview with Robert W. Jenson

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Robert W. Jenson recently retired as senior scholar at the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton. He and longtime colleague Carl Braaten founded the journals Dialog *and* Pro Ecclesia *and the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. He has taught at Luther College, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Oxford University and St. Olaf College. His many books include* America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards *(1988), the two-volume* Systematic Theology *(1997; 1999),* On Thinking the Human *(2003) and, most recently, a commentary on Song of Songs for the Interpretation Bible Commentary series. We spoke with him about changes in the theological landscape and issues facing the church.*

How has the field of theology changed in terms of topics or method since you first entered it in the mid-20th century? What gives you hope and what discourages you?

One great change: I went to Germany to study for the doctorate because that was still where the action was. Just imagine: my *rigorosum*—the sudden-death oral exam—was conducted by Gerhard von Rad, Günther Bornkamm, Hans von Campenhausen, Peter Brunner and Edmund Schlink. Now the United States is the center.

Another: the Americanization of theology has had both good and bad consequences. A bad one is a typically American scholarly and speculative individualism; in theology diversity is often a good thing, but entrepreneurship is not.

Still another: when I began to study, the historical-critical way of reading scripture—and indeed of reading the documents of the tradition—reigned alone. It has finally become apparent that historical-critical reading of scripture simply cannot sustain spiritual life, and efforts are under way to recapture the figural reading of the older tradition. The question is: can this be done without jettisoning the benefits of historical-critical work? I think it can.

As to encouragement, I am greatly encouraged by the appearance of a remarkable middle generation of fine theologians and exegetes, mostly in Britain and this

country. As to discouragement, the great blockade between theology and the practice of the churches is still in place.

The notion that Christians are declared righteous for the sake of Christ has been a central part of Lutheran theology and most Protestant theology. Yet with the influence of Eastern Orthodoxy on the one hand and various Anabaptist influences on the other, this "forensic" or "juridical" understanding of justification is being questioned. At the least, many Protestants are bringing justification and sanctification closer together. What do you make of these trends? Do Protestants need to rethink their understanding of justification?

All Christian theologians teach that we are declared righteous for the sake of Christ. It is the *declared* that opens conflicting possibilities. Catholics and others have accused Protestants of so construing God's declaration as to make it a judicial fiction—in my view, with considerable reason. But the way to fix that is not, I think, by bringing justification and sanctification closer together, since making the distinction in the first place only displays the problem. At least for the initial great Protester himself, God's declaring us holy and his making us actually holy are the same act done by the same means.

That is, I think the "Finnish school" of Luther interpretation has it right, whether or not it was materially influenced by Orthodoxy. According to Luther according to the Finns, what happens "by faith" is that Christ himself, whose oral and sacramentally enacted word is his personal presence, comes by the reception of this word so to inhabit the believer that Christ and the believer make one moral person. To repeat the Finns' signature Luther quote, *in ipsa fide Christus adest*, "in faith as such Christ is just there." We are made righteous "by faith apart from works" not because God chooses to ignore the fact of missing works, but because as inhabited by Christ we in fact are already truly righteous, before we ever get around to doing works. Thus God's declaration that we are righteous solely for Christ's sake is a judgment rather than a legal ruling. It may be worth noting that America's greatest theologian, Jonathan Edwards, had more or less the same doctrine.

The Finnish insight's ecumenical consequences are considerable. For the major instance so far, the Joint Declaration on Justification between the Catholic Church and world Lutheranism would probably have been rejected by Rome except for the influence on the final draft of the Lutheran bishop of Helsinki.

As for myself, through much of my life I tried to figure out Luther on the assumption that Luther interpretation on the lines of Gerhard Ebeling was veridical. I am glad to be delivered from that sisyphean task.

In the 20th century, theologians showed a renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet these theologians continue to struggle with categories derived from Greek metaphysics—an unchanging God, etc. What do you see as the main issues in articulating the Trinity for our time? How would you seek to revivify the place of the Trinity not only in theology but in Christian life?

In the wake of the earlier volumes of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* and a 1967 article by Karl Rahner, serious Western theology has rediscovered—at least momentarily—the centrality of the doctrine of Trinity. The doctrine is found to be nothing less than the comprehensive statement of the gospel's most radical claims, and—as I have often put it—is therefore not a theological puzzle but the framework within which to deal with theological puzzles. There continues to be a flood of publication about the doctrine—some of it good and some, to be sure, not so good. And an interior debate has developed, which sometimes gets rather heated.

The disagreement goes deep. We may describe it by reference to "Rahner's rule," which—except for Orthodox participants in the discussion—nearly everyone claims to honor. Rahner asserted that the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity and vice versa, that is, that God's eternal triune life and his triune history with us in time are somehow one event, that God is not otherwise Father, Son and Spirit in himself than he is among us, and vice versa.

Standard Western theology, according to Rahner and others, has been led by alien philosophical maxims to posit an ontological chasm between God's triune history in time and his eternal triune being—so that, for instance, it has been thought that the Father or the Spirit could have become incarnate instead of the Son. Such teaching made the distinctions and relations between the eternal divine persons and the actual history of salvation mutually undetermined, and so of course made the eternal Trinity irrelevant in the life of faith.

The debate is about the *somehow* just above, about construal of the *is* in Rahner's rule. Those on the one side of the argument accuse those on the other of so identifying God with his history among us as to make him dependent on us. Those of

the latter party accuse those of the former of continuing so to construe eternity by categories alien to the biblical account of God—for example, by “timelessness”—as effectively to return us to the dead end from which Barth and Rahner called us.

I am among those accused of confusing God and creation. Two metaphysical sensibilities seem to be in play here, which perhaps cannot be resolved short of the beatific vision. For under various rubrics the same clash has recurred throughout theological history, between Alexandria—my side—and Antioch, East and West, Lutheran and Reformed.

As to how I would revivify trinitarian piety in the congregations, were I in position to do so I would issue two decrees. I would make the clergy take time out from administration and “prophetic” politics to read a difficult book or two. And I would for the immediate future ban all “relevant” liturgy, most of which all too blatantly verifies Rahner’s observation that trinitarian faith has little role in Western pop Christianity—though he was of course too polite to use that last adjective.

What do you hope for and what do you foresee regarding the ecumenical movement?

I foresee continued stagnation—abstracting of course from an uncovenanted intervention of the Spirit. The ecumenical movement is not very interesting if it is simply an apparatus for practical comity and joint political agitation; its heart must be concern for what ecumenists have called “faith and order,” that is, for the theological and structural divisions that prevent fellowship at the Lord’s table, and for the possibilities of overcoming them. Of that concern there are now few stirrings outside professional ranks; indeed, people find it hard to imagine what enthusiasm there once was in congregations and educational institutions.

That Faith and Order ecumenism is dead in the water has for some time been widely recognized. Out of that recognition, scores of American church leaders five years ago endorsed an initiative to hold a “second Oberlin.” The Faith and Order movement in North America had been kindled by a 1957 conference at Oberlin College, mostly of mainline Protestants; the hope was that a similar but more broadly based conference might rekindle the movement. An independent foundation was created to carry the effort, since it was apparent that for many reasons the National Council of Churches could not. In January of this year, the foundation’s incorporating directors formally terminated the venture. It was undone by mainline

Protestantism's present indifference to and distraction from the whole matter, by evangelicalism's unconcern about separation at the Lord's table, and by deliberate obstruction from within the established ecumenical apparatus.

To be sure, this pessimistic assessment indeed abstracts from the unpredictable work of the Spirit. When Pope Benedict XVI was still Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he said on several much-quoted occasions that further major ecumenical progress depended on a new "depth of faith" worked by a new initiative of the Spirit. That can happen at any time and is what we should pray for—and prayer is the most optimistic act a creature can perform.

What do you think will be the theological impact of global Christianity's geographic shift away from Europe and North America and to the Southern Hemisphere and Asia? And of the rising influence of Pentecostal churches and the relative waning of churches in the historic confessional traditions?

I think that is unpredictable. As an intrinsically missionary faith, Christianity repeatedly invades geographically or historically new turf—and it never finds that turf religiously unoccupied. In the ensuing conversation and argument, Christianity will discover both agreements with the antecedent religion and necessary disagreements. As the missionary partner, Christianity will change in some ways, whether the other does or not: it will have to address new questions and configurations of thought, and weigh liturgical and cultural practices to be adopted, adapted or rejected. A form of the church will emerge which may look and sound very different from previous forms—as different, say, as a late-fourth-century Eucharist in Alexandria from a first-century breaking of bread in Jerusalem.

Some have thought they could so securely identify a general and repeated pattern of religious history as to predict the outcome of a particular contestation of this sort. I am tempted to such hubris but try to resist it. It is in any case too soon, in my view, to know in what ways the churches of Africa or India or China will be specifically African or Indian or Chinese a century or so from now.

Accounts of theological and political disputes in this country often pit the religious right against mainline or liberal Protestantism. How would you describe the main features of the American religious landscape and where would you locate yourself?

Contrasting liberal or left with conservative or right yields, in my view, a map of very limited utility. For my own part, I have been labeled both ways, depending on who was disapproving of me.

At least theologically, there are two effective divisions between American Christians. One is between those for whom the gospel is itself the norm of all truth and the person of Christ therefore the founding metaphysical fact, and those for whom some other agenda or "theory" is the overriding norm. The other is between those who use "justification by faith"—or in the especially aggravated case of Lutherans, the "law and gospel" distinction—to fund their antinomianism, and those appalled by this. The language in which I have described the alternatives will doubtless betray on which side of each division I find myself.

Churches on the left and right often see themselves in opposition to the dominant culture—whether they are opposing abortion rights on one side or opposing U.S. foreign policy on the other. Is Richard Niebuhr's description of "Christ against culture" still a helpful way to speak about the church's political stance with regard to the world?

I have long thought that Niebuhr's book, for all its individual insights, was based on a false setting of the question. Whatever preposition you put between *Christ* and *culture*, its mere presence there marks and enforces the supposition that Christ and culture are entities different in kind. But it is of course only the risen Christ who can now have a relation to a culture, and this living Christ's body is the church. And the church—with its scriptures, odd rituals and peculiar forms of government—is plainly itself a culture.

Therefore the real question is always about the relation of the church culture to some other culture with which the church's mission involves it at a time and place. And I do not think the relation can be the same in every case. During the time of "Christendom," the culture of the church and the culture of the West were barely distinguishable. I do not think this "Constantinian settlement" was avoidable. When the empire said, "Come over and help us hold civilization together," should the bishops have just refused?

As to Christendom's consequences for faith, some were beneficial and some were malign, as is usual with great historical configurations. During the present collapse of Christendom and its replacement by an antinomian and would-be pagan culture,

confrontation must of course be more the style.

What do you make of the recent conversions to the Roman Catholic Church of some prominent Protestant theologians, such as Reinhard Hütter, Bruce Marshall, Rusty Reno and Gerald Schlabach—theologians you yourself have been in conversation with?

One could add to the list. Those of them I know well describe their reasons differently. But I think one thing is common to all or most of them: they intend to inhabit the one, historically real church confessed by the creeds, and could no longer recognize this in their Protestant denominations. And indeed, if the church of the creeds does not, as the Second Vatican Council put it, “subsist in” the Roman Catholic Church, it is hard to think where it could.

Blanche Jenson long ago convinced me that the Western church could be renewed in faithfulness only by a fruit-basket upset of alignments, and that God must surely have something like that in mind. Perhaps this movement of theologians is part of such an upset. I lament the loss to the Protestant denominations, but I rejoice in the access of talent and energy to the church which will in future bear most of Christianity’s burden. For if present trends continue, the ecumene of the century now beginning will comprise Orthodoxy, Pentecostalist groups and predominantly the Roman Catholic Church; the Protestant denominations and territorial churches will have sunk into insignificance—but again, present trends of course do not always continue.