

SPIRIT TOPICS: TRINITY, PERSONHOOD, MYSTERY AND TONGUES

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Hardly ever has a review of a book of mine given me such joy as the one by Frank D. Macchia. To be sure, in part this joy is due to Macchia's positive reaction. However, I am much more pleased by his precise, circumspect and sensitive reconstruction of my intentions and concerns. Macchia has not only grasped the main lines, but also the subtleties, not only the main intentions, but also the minor ones. Such a subtle reconstruction is particularly welcome to a systematic theologian who deals with the biblical traditions and, in doing so, has to take into account that again and again he is misunderstood and does not fit any of the readily available categories. After a few misunderstandings and caricatures of my book by German colleagues I find it a great relief that a colleague has understood the book not only as a whole, but also in its details. And also in its limits.

If I am not mistaken, Frank Macchia points out five problems or rather limits of my book. Two of these are limits I drew on purpose. They may be indicated by the keywords *reference to tradition* and *trinitarian theology*. Now I see that I should have made clearer my intention to place limits at those points. Two more of these problems, expressed by the keywords *mystery / mystic experience* and *personhood of the Spirit*, result from the directions of my argumentation and from my interests in enlightenment and clarification. Macchia is certainly correct when he says that the strong emphasis on certain critical and constructive concerns can lead to an overemphasis that backfires

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by resulting in certain blindnesses. The fifth problem which is of the most importance to Macchia and which takes up about a third of his review (over against hardly a thirtieth in my book) requires a longer discussion between us. The keywords here are—and what else could they be?—*speaking in tongues*.

I

In the theological traditions in which I grew up the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was again and again absorbed by trinitarian theology (which in fact was mostly binitarian theology) or by ecclesiology. In my book I wanted to avoid such an approach. I meant to counter objections like 'How can one write a pneumatology without a trinitarian theology?' by stating that countless Christologies and doctrines of creation had been published without a trinitarian theology and that did not create a disturbance. However, my main reason for proceeding thus was that in the face of the unsatisfying condition of dialogistic or of so-called social doctrines of the Trinity, I proposed putting aside for a while trinitarian speculations that work from the top down. As an alternative I proposed working from the bottom up and on a biblical-theological basis to gather new insights in pneumatology, Christology and the doctrine of creation. These insights would in turn enable us to develop more complex approaches in trinitarian theology—approaches more closely related to experience.¹ In the pneumatologically based work I have done in the meantime in ecclesiology, I have tried to show that the premodern traditions shed light on post-modern problems, such as an understanding of pluralism in churches and cultures.²

The widespread tendency to subdue pneumatology by trinitarian theology or by ecclesiology was the reason why I found only a few models and allies in the history of doctrine. For this reason, as well as

1. Cf. M. Welker, 'Christian Theology: What Direction at the End of the Second Millenium?', in M. Volf *et al.* (eds.), *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 73-88.

2. Cf. M. Welker, "'... And also Upon the Menservants and the Maidservants in Those Days Will I Pour My Spirit': On Pluralism and the Promise of the Spirit", *Soundings* 78.1 (1995), pp. 49-65; *Kirche im Pluralismus* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1995); 'What Happens in the Lord's Supper?', *Dialog* 35 (1996), pp. 209-17; *Was geht vor beim Abendmahl?* (Stuttgart: Quell, 1998).

for the reasons stated by Frank Macchia and Rickie Moore, I decided to choose a consistent biblical-theological orientation. This orientation obliges one to work with a network of images, metaphors and figures of thought whose power to sort and integrate falls short of such simple and impressive figures in the history of dogma as 'the Spirit as the subjective side of revelation' (Karl Barth). The disadvantage of such highly integrative forms of thought is that they easily become 'misleading abstractions' which dull sensitivity of perception in both exegesis and cultural criticism. Although I made an effort to learn in this respect from the mistakes of great theologians of our century, my book is not free from this weakness in that it, in countering misleading abstractions, is in danger of developing its own abstractions. Clear-sighted, Frank Macchia points this out.

II

In my two dissertations I worked on philosophers of German idealism. Fichte's theory of self-consciousness was a guiding star in my search for knowledge in the years of my academic youth.³ Only when I worked on Whitehead and Schleiermacher did I understand how reductionist the modern concepts of person are. Widely used academic phrases such as 'person in relation' or 'person as relation' are completely inadequate. For the foundation of anthropology the helpful theories are those which grasp the complex self-reference of personal existence, the intimate familiarity with oneself in simple self-reference, and the 'public person' as a realm of resonance that is only partly picked up by self-reference. In my opinion we urgently need to develop such demanding concepts of personhood in order to preserve an understanding of divine personhood in adoration of and reflection upon the triune Godhead, and in order to go beyond what could be termed the 'Trinity of three points of reference'. In the context of this concern I have come to regard as important the biblical insight that the Spirit does not have an abstract self-reference like the human person, but that a 'public personality' can be attributed to the Spirit. This does not mean that I deny that the Spirit can be understood as a 'centre of action'. What I oppose is only the assumption that this

3. Cf. Welker, *Der Vorgang Autonomie: Philosophische Beiträge zur Einsicht in theologischer Rezeption und Kritik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1975).

'centering' is to be grasped in analogy to an anthropocentric self-centering. In taking this position I am quite aware of the fact that my strong criticism of the Aristotelian Occidental concept of spirit pushes my own argumentation into a dualization that can become problematic. I think that we need to address these problems in the context of trinitarian theology and of an elucidation of God's personhood. I have only begun to work in this latter field.

Whereas my philosophical and trinitarian experiences on the level of theory prejudice and perhaps even blind me with regard to the concept of person, the thematic complex of *mystery and mysticism* shows a lack of experience, as Macchia correctly sees. Apart from the periods of life when I was a member of a church choir in my childhood in Berlin and when I was a guest professor in North America, I have not been treated to rich witnesses to spirituality in the services of my church. In 'mysticism' I saw above all the danger of Eckhart's depletion of theology, which then turns into secularization in the form of modern concepts of empty self-consciousness. Furthermore, my deep aversion to theological ciphers and 'great words' without a clearly definable substance has certainly caused my view to be one-sided. But then the heavily rationalized context of European Protestantism has forced us to draw attention to pneumatology via an approach pointedly oriented towards knowledge. Even if I had had richer personal spiritual experiences and had thus been able to put more emphasis on the mystery and mystical dimensions of the experience of the Spirit, I would very likely only have strengthened the prejudices against pneumatology in my context by emphasizing this aspect too much. Like Frank Macchia, I consider the fine but distant fields of theological aesthetics the promised land, which we need to explore better in order to increase our competence in mystical expression. But here again I have reached the domain of future tasks.

III

Whereas with regard to these problems I readily concede weaknesses or point out the need for further theological research and knowledge, we shall have to work on a difference with regard to 'speaking in tongues'. I accept Macchia's observation and different emphasis:

I received the impression from Welker that such clarification of the Spirit's work [scil. in the redemptive transformation of life] in Scripture surpasses or supersedes those passages which depict the encounter with

the Spirit as incomprehensible. I would want to refer instead to the mutual illumination and even the creative *tension* between the incomprehensible and the clear encounters with the Spirit in Scripture, as also in life.

Here—as well as elsewhere—I have learned a lot from Macchia's emphasis on phenomena of the Spirit's working that remain underexposed in my biblical theology. However, he seems to shift the tension too much in the direction of the 'incomprehensible', perhaps as a counter-move to my one-sidedness.

To Macchia, it is important that the Pentecost event was initially an 'unintelligible event'. But in Acts 2 I do not see any traces that historical criticism could analyse as 'the transformation of tongues as an unintelligible event into one with prophetic significance'. As is the case in the testimonies to the resurrection, there are those who doubt and even ridicule the event. But there is the threefold emphasis: 'We hear them proclaim in our languages'. In Acts 10, it is at least clear that the text is concerned with doxology and not with any form of demonic possession. Acts 19 stresses expressly the connection of tongues and prophecy. Acts 4.31, 8.17, 9.17 and 11.15 speak of the 'coming of the Spirit' without mentioning the gift of 'ways of speaking in tongues'.

Yet these observations did not lead me to an anti-Pentecostal polemic, as I am sorry to say is Macchia's impression. Quite the contrary. On the one hand, I want to make it clear that *neither* Luke *nor* Paul supports the opinion that speaking in tongues with its need for interpretation is the *central* gift of the Spirit. On the other hand, I warn the non-Pentecostal theologies and churches against simply laying aside or even stigmatizing the gift of speaking in tongues. According to clear statements, even of the critical Paul, speaking in tongues belongs among the gifts of the Spirit. What I certainly did not do in my pneumatology is to unfold the *richness* in Pentecostal churches of the phenomena of speaking in tongues. Not only did I simply lack the experience and the knowledge, but the discussion would have led too far into ecclesiology (see above). Macchia himself stresses the great diversity of viewpoints among Pentecostals.

Admittedly my book is influenced by the scepticism of European Protestant theology towards the whole realm of phenomena of pneumatology. The book would be a bad bridge for conversation if it did not express this scepticism. But it is not its intention to adopt a polemical position against those churches and theologies that do not

share this scepticism. Rather, the book poses to them the following question: Could we not, on the basis of the biblical traditions, reach a better understanding and, along with it, a better estimation of our differences and of the fruitfulness of exactly these differences? With regard to speaking in tongues, my book, in consideration of Luke and Paul, tries to overcome the irreconcilable opposition between speaking in tongues as the *central* gift of the Spirit and speaking in tongues as an *unacceptable* gift of the Spirit. The argument is that speaking in tongues is certainly a unique gift of the Spirit and that those who look down on speaking in tongues need to discover this for their own good, even if initially they do not have access to this gift in their active piety. But the argument is also that tongues speaking *which is in need of interpretation* is not the central or highest gift of the Spirit—it is related to clear prophetic speech (Luke) or even subordinated to it (Paul).

If we want to find out more precisely what the balance is between these positions and to explore in more detail the field of tension between the clear and the mystical workings of the Spirit, we will need exegetical and practical-theological help. Exegetically, we will have to investigate further the public mysteries of the Pentecost event, in order to examine the difference between Frank Macchia's interpretation and mine. With regard to practical theology, we will have to look more closely at the wealth of the gift of speaking in tongues and at its powers of giving testimony. Thus a dialogue on a pneumatological and ecclesial basis is needed between Protestant and Pentecostal theologies. I highly appreciate and am grateful for Frank Macchia's invitation to such a dialogue.