RE-IMAGINING THE “EROTICS OF REDEMPTION”

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In his 2001 chapter of Cities of God, “The Erotics of Redemption,” Graham Ward argues for a rethinking of the place of marriage within Christian theology. He says in his introduction:

The character of marriage at the moment...privileges one form of relationship over another, constructs gender along lines of biological, reproductive difference, and reinforces a social policy that needs to be challenged and transformed. The politics of the heterosexual family are predicated upon an unreflective biosociality which renders unnatural (if not even criminal) homosexuality and, what is possibly worse, reifies two models of sexual orientation within which all human being is situated...Marriage, as the Church conceives and practices it today, sacramentalises an exclusive relationship between two positions, one biologically male and the other female. I argue for the need for a redemption from such erotics and outline the economy such a redemption might take.1

From this initial framing, Ward seems to be arguing for broadening the purview of “marriage” from a heterosexist framework into a more robust perspective on relationality across lines of sexual difference. Ward engages a series of analyses that places Karl Barth in dialogue with critical theory on the questions of ontological difference, sexual difference (especially Barth’s reading of the creation narratives), and the analogy of the covenant to marriage. In this analysis, he makes a series of questionable choices regarding his reading of Barth and deployment (or not) of queer theory and French feminism that leads to him to conclude: “The Church must sanctify, then, genuine sexual difference through its liturgies—whether that sexual difference is evident between two women, two men, or a man and a woman.”2 His “refiguring” turns out only to be an argument for the inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians into the uneven, heterosexist model of marriage that the Church already has, a model based not on trinitarian difference (that is, the difference between the persons of the Trinity) but ontological difference (the difference between God and what is not God, or creation). Ward consistently confuses trinitarian and ontological difference, or slips into the latter almost immediately after presenting the former. I seek to read Ward’s inter-textual analysis in this essay for where he could have made more

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2 Ibid., 202.
radical choices, those places where he ends up reinforcing the same heterosexism he claims to rout, namely in terms of covenant. In re-reading, I aim to re-imagine a queerer and more expansive account of Christian erotic relationality based on trinitarian difference, rather than covenant, that looks for difference not only (or primarily) in twos, but in ones, threes, and beyond.

**Difference and Desire**

To begin, Ward details the formation of sacred erotics against agapaic relations in Barth’s thought. There has long been a correspondence, Ward says, between the sexual and the sacred in such a way that human and divine desires are construed as being equivalent, or at least operating under the same terms. This runs counter to a Christian perspective that distinguishes between intradivine desire and human eros. An extreme case of this is represented by Barth (following Anders Nygren) who ontologizes eros (human desire) and agape (intradivine desire) as two separate economies of desire. Nygren holds that eros is necessarily inferior to agape; human love completely pales in comparison to divine love to the point of not being love at all, but self-love.\(^3\) Barth alters this slightly and finds a place for human eros within the context of marriage, but only as policed by a higher agape which forms the basis their primarily union.\(^4\) Ward protests against this dichotomization of eros and agape, and the subordination of the former to the latter, saying that it “leaves human passions unredeemed, at worst, or okay-but, at best.”\(^5\) Rather, while human and divine desire should not be conflated, human eros can participate in divine desire. The question becomes how difference is maintained, while not isolating one from the other in a way that will always subjugate human desire to the divine. “The concern...is the way this ontological difference, founded in trinitarian difference, relates to

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\(^3\) Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 96-7, as paraphrased by Ward, *Cities of God*, 183. On this and other references quoted by Ward, it is not the concern of this paper to address Nygren, Barth, Irigaray, Butler, or any other secondary text on their own terms, but rather Ward’s treatment of them.


sexual differences (plural), such that desire can incarnate redemption and build the kingdom of heaven.” Ward tilts his hand slightly here, already suggesting that the model for his erotics of redemption, while maybe being “founded” in the Trinity, is actually based on ontological difference.

The concern with difference, its recognition and maintenance, is founded in the structure of desire as Ward understands it. Differently than Lacan for whom desire is based upon lack, all desire for Ward is constituted by difference. It is not, as it is for Nietzsche, some “indifferent flux, a malleable flow of molten energies out of which everything is constructed.” For Ward, such indifference, sameness, etc., cannot explain desire much less provide the ground for it. As in Roland Barthes, it is the encounter with alterity in all of its messy discontinuity that animates desire. All desire from God and for God is based on the fact that God is wholly other to humanity. Here we see a first slippage in mapping alterity primarily in terms of ontological difference. Because of this basis of desire in difference, it is important to preserve this difference, as well as sexual difference, when deconstructing the problematic dichotomizing of eros and agape that Ward sees in Barth’s account of sexual difference. At the same time, Ward acknowledges that sexual difference is a rather more complicated question. Paraphrasing Thomas Laqueur and Teresa de Lauretis, Ward notes that sexual difference itself is produced discursively by a heteronormative society concerned with finding proof of two distinct biological sexes. As such, particular attention must be made to whom and from what location such sexual difference is a question, as these are neither fixed nor neutral categories. With such pervasive insistence upon difference, how does Ward find such possibility for an encounter that might produce the desire for which he searches? It is because difference is not absolute and exclusory: “There can be reconciliation, there can be mediation, only because the differences do not stand incommensurably over against each other. They are differences (trinitarian, ontological, sexual),

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6 Ibid. We will return to this quotation shortly.
7 Ibid., 185.
8 Ibid., 186.
9 Ibid., 187.
differences plural, but they are always differences-in-relation.”10 It is this relationality across lines of differences that allows for the rest of what follows in Ward’s account of the erotics of redemption, the economy of desire across and along these lines of difference: sexual, ontological, and (dubiously, as we shall see) trinitarian.

Ward goes on to preface his analysis of Barth’s theology of sexual difference by drawing some of these horizons for relations. The first is that which gives rise to the title of his chapter: erotics of redemption. Ward explains the economy of redemption by pointing to the indissolubility of eschatology, pneumatology, and soteriology. That is to say that redemption is to be understood as the Holy Spirit bringing the human into the divine life (following Balthasar, the true nature of soteriology being reunion with and participation in God, through the Holy Spirit that subdends the ontological interval). This happens along an eschatological horizon, an already-not-yet, which serves as an engine for human-divine desire. What Ward wishes to find is the relationship between this economy of redemption and libidinal (i.e. sexual) desire that can contribute to sexual healing, a participation in redemption through one’s body. By mapping this economy onto sexual difference, it is erotic, sexual desire that forms the basis of this participation, which results in an erotics of redemption.11 Human eros, then, could participate in the intratrinitarian life within its own economy. Ultimately for Ward, the upshot of these erotics of redemption is a doctrine of marriage that could, broadly, ground the church as an erotic community, where human desire is not deemed inferior but holy and, dare I say, sacramental.

Difference here becomes the basis of the *imago Dei* in Ward’s understanding—“in attraction-in-difference is reflected the difference-in-relation in the trinitarian God.”12 At least on the surface, Ward seems to be positing a model of relationality not based on ontological difference, but on trinitarian difference, one that would subvert a dyadist concept of marriage and open a marital horizon that would sanctify relationality *per se*. But already, as we have seen,
Ward slips into a basis in ontological difference. In the sentence immediately following the one quoted above, he writes:

In the character of that reflection lies a whole doctrine of analogy. There can be not analogical world-view without difference. It is a world-view constituted from above—we reflect, we are not the prototype. It is the expression of the difference-in-relation of the Incarnate Christ, the revelation of God, the Man-God, as Calvin frequently refers to Him.\textsuperscript{13}

The difference to which Ward points here is not the difference-in-relation of the trinitarian hypostases, but in the Christic hypostatic union, which is relationship over an ontological and not trinitarian difference. Which, then, are we to reflect? Is it Christ or the Trinity?

\textbf{Barth’s Theology of Sexual Difference}

Turning, then, to sexual difference in \textit{Church Dogmatics} III, Ward identifies three primary points in Barth’s argument: 1) creation as a separation from God, 2) “man” as neither male nor female but both, and 3) marriage as expression of erotic/agapaic economies. First, creation—understood as only a recipient of God’s love—established an original interval between God and not-God (ontological difference) that is only overcome by the freedom of God to love. This gap is subtended by the medium for that giving, namely the Holy Spirit, which preserves difference-in-relation. This contingency of being leads to particular understanding of materiality, that it is only properly thought in terms of the Spirit that permits it. Materiality is not to be construed as significant in itself, but only in terms of its spiritual import as acted upon by the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{14} We can hear here the preoccupation of Barth in Ward’s reading of him to avoid natural theology and Schleiermacher with it. For Barth, it is not the case that nature maps onto the divine, but the divine onto creation, which is marked by an interval that only the Holy Spirit (which subtends it) can travel. This is the basis of Ward’s understanding of ontological difference in Barth, which will reappear throughout.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics} III.1, 231 and \textit{Church Dogmatics} III.2, 365, as paraphrased by Ward, \textit{Cities of God}, 189.
Second, Ward holds that “man” as Barth uses it is to speak of “created in the image of God,” is not male or female, but both. This “man” is the German Mensch, which might be better translated as “humankind.” Ward here takes Barth at his word on this issue, but while Barth may say he uses the term in this generalist way, he inconsistently distinguishes between Mensch “humanity” and Mann “male human” in a way that suggests the two are conflated for him. One sign of this can be seen in the way Barth contrasts Mensch and Weib “woman,” not just Mann and Weib.15 Whether or not, then, we can say that Mensch is neither male nor female but both, rather than a transcendent masculine (for example), is debatable. Nevertheless, Mensch is created in an unequal binarism of “male” and “female.” In Barth’s account of the creation narratives, Adam is only completed in his humanity when God takes from him a rib, forms it into woman, and presents it to him, allowing him to recognize the woman as both like him, but not him.16 But this relationship is mediated through the Spirit, and so reflecting the hierarchy of God and creation, established in creation itself. As Ward notes: “Sexual difference reproduces an ontological difference.”17 Ward identifies two separate economies of desire operating in Barth’s schema. The first of these is the economy of giving, that of God’s love, which is not predicated on any lack in God but rather on God’s perfectly free loving, as established in his doctrine of God (especially II.1 §28). This kind of free loving for Barth necessitates, and thus creates, difference. In a Hegelian frame, as Ward identifies it, this love is “kenotic and corresponds to the intradivine love of the Trinity.”18 Within the eros/agape divide that Ward identifies, the economy of desire bridging the interval between God and humanity is the same economy of desire between the persons of the Trinity, agape. This is further confirmed by the position of the

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15 E.g. Karl Barth, Kierkliche Dogmatik III.1, 368, 371.
16 Barth, Church Dogmatics III.1, 290-1.
17 Ward, Cities of God, 190.
18 Ibid.
Spirit subtending the interval in an extension of the divine agapic economy, reaching down and including humanity.\textsuperscript{19}

The second economy is that of human desire, rooted in the very substance of what it means to be human. Man (note the intentional equivocation) can only become complete through viewing woman and realizing that he is not \textit{her}. As Ward rightly notes, this is a masculinist Lacanian desire based on an inherent lacking in man for the phallus, which he strives to possess in possessing the woman. As Ward says, “The aim is to have one’s demand satisfied. Its aim is possession and incorporation of the other, the eclipse and erasure of difference.”\textsuperscript{20} This second economy ends not in difference, but in completion marked by the erasure of the woman through re-union with the man; the \textit{Mann} and the \textit{Weib} come together to restore \textit{Mann} (but not \textit{Weib}) to the original state of \textit{Mensch}. In essence, the male swallows the female in order to complete himself.

Ward identifies a third economy that arises from these first two, in which agape conditions and refines eros into its “true” form. This happens for Barth ecclesiologically: “the lovers as believers are ‘united not merely in eros but also primarily in agape, in the Lord and the in the community of His brethren.’”\textsuperscript{21} According to Ward, there is a strong tension between even “true eros” and the agape evidenced by the Church, which suggests that it may be this latter that reflects the love of God rather than a couple.\textsuperscript{22} Again, this is not all that surprising, given Barth’s account creation of humanity as “male and female” in a way that reflects, not trinitarian difference, but ontological difference. And so, Ward points to two separate economies of desire along two separate ontological orders. The first is intradivine agape, across twofold difference of Father and Son, and these two and Spirit, who share a common ousia. The second is an

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\textsuperscript{19} Here, we begin to hear in Ward’s analysis hints of Balthasar, in which (especially in his account of Christ’s harrowing of hell) human beings are caught up in the movement of the divine \textit{dramatis personae}.
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\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 191.
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\textsuperscript{22} Ward, \textit{Cities of God}, 191.
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interhuman eros, between male and female who share a being. The onotological difference here is maintained, but because agape and eros work in antithetical ways, one of free giving and one of lack, so that there can ultimately be not economy of desire across the line of ontological difference. Even if eros can be refined by agape, it is still inferior and opposite, and thus excluded from participation in intradivine desire, and so also incapable of analogizing it.

Finally, the third point in Barth’s argument for Ward is that marriage arises from these antithetical economies of desire and independent ontologies. Marriage for Barth is that space where these two can interact, on the line of covenant. As Ward says, “The external covenant (of God with human beings) and the internal covenant (of human beings with each other) co-exist. Where the radical difference between these two economies of desire, and two forms of *analogia entis* come together is the text and tissue of history and ecclesiology.” Marriage becomes a witness to universal reconciliation in God as announced by the Christian tradition, in the promise of covenant. Sexual difference within the married couple becomes a re-presentation of the economy of redemption between God and humanity. But note here once again, it is not *trinitarian* difference that is being mapped analogously by marriage, but *ontological* difference. As Ward indicates, Barth’s reading of corporeality primarily in terms of its theological/spiritual rather than material/biological/sociological perspective leads him to figure male/female relations in terms of “partnership” and other synonyms, erasing biological difference in the eyes of God. Instead of male-female, we are left with an I-Thou configuration that analogizes the ontological difference between God and humanity.

Ward moves with Barth at this point and confuses trinitarian and ontological differences: claiming to argue marriage maps trinitarian difference, while actually framing it in terms of ontological difference. Ward may be mimicking at a certain level Barth’s own theology, but he ends up simply reproducing without mention the discrepancy here. This instability finally

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 192.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
erupts in a dizzying exercise of confused theocalculus. Ward writes: “It is this covenant through
desire for the other that constitutes the image in us of the nature of the Godhead itself and the
economy of relations created by reciprocal desire within the Godhead. It is not biology *per se.*”\(^{27}\)
Working backward through this, it is not biology, nor complementarity between male and
female, nor reproductive economy, that characterizes the image of God in us, but desire. The
economy of relations in which we are created is reciprocal desire within the Godhead, that is
trinitarian difference. Though it is a truism, we need to remind ourselves here that trinitarian
difference is by definition between three. According to this account, it is desire like the
Trinity’s—that is, the desire between the persons of the Trinity—that constitutes the *imago Dei*
in humankind. Ward continues, paraphrasing this: “Put another way, God does not see male and
female, God sees human being in partnership, in covenantal relationships of I and Thou, One
and the Other reflecting His own Triune nature.”\(^{28}\) Let’s do a body count. I and Thou: two. Self
and Other: two. God’s triune nature: three. What is going on here? The confusion between
trinitarian and ontological difference ruptures the logic. I-Thou and One-Other are among the
terms Barth uses to describe the covenant between God and humanity, not the intradivine
relations. What Ward wants to see here is for human desire to reflect God’s desire, but he frames
that as being *for humanity* and not within the Godhead itself. This desire *for* God and *from* God
does give us difference, but it is not the triune nature of God. So is marriage about trinitarian
difference, mapping the *imago Dei*, or is it about ontological difference, re-presenting the
covenant? It appears that Ward does not which he wants; or perhaps he wants it both ways, but
just cannot quite make two equal three.\(^{29}\)

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 193.

\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) Though Barth’s own *ménage à trois* (namely, with his wife Nelly, and his live-in “assistant,” Charlotte)
might be prime territory for what Marcella Althaus-Reid calls “libertine arithmetical queering”: “What is
three? Two plus one (as in the heterosexual scene of husband, wife and lover)? Or is it one plus one plus
one (as in detached loving encounters of affectively independent people)? How do we define faith here?”
Keeping this in mind, Ward moves to Barth’s reading of the Song of Songs. In keeping with a metaphorical reading of the Song (which is itself an erasure of the explicitly sexual nature of the text, and not necessarily between married people anyhow), and following his earlier contention that corporeality is only correctly thought theologically, Barth sees the male and female as, primarily, YHWH and Israel. This gets carried over onto the Christ-Church relationship as well. And so now, Barth points out the three typologies contained here: “the divine likeness of man [Mensch] as male and female which in the plan and election of God is primarily the relationship between Jesus Christ and His Church, secondarily the relationship between Y[HWH] and Israel, and only finally—although very directly in view of its origin—the relationship between the sexes.”  

Not to beat a dead horse unnecessarily, yet again we see that the real analogy being made in Barth (but this time not in Ward, as we shall see shortly) is on the grounds of ontological difference and not trinitarian difference. At this stage, the Trinity does not even figure, but only the covenant. To sum up these three major points: humanity can only participate in a divine economy of love by the subjugation of that which makes their love (eros) human and seeing their difference only reflecting the ontological gap in which God stands free over a contingent humanity (agape); humanity does not reflect intradivine love, not matter how much Barth may try to construe it as such.

Queering (?) Barth

Ward takes up his re-reading beginning with Barth’s highly questionable phrase “although very directly in view of its origin.”  

Ward quickly identifies this correspondence between sexual difference and ontological difference as a slippage in his theologizing of sexual difference in a way that works against his analogia fidei, suggesting a natural theology on this front. Wishing to get beyond simply a biological or socio-historical understanding of sexual

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30 Barth, Church Dogmatics III.1, 322, as quoted by Ward, Cities of God, 194.
31 Ibid.
identity (sex, sexuality, and gender), Ward draws on the work of Judith Butler to point to the ways in which power and language construct materiality, and therefore the body.

The formation of sexed personhood as a production...takes place within a symbolic field. Gender is performed... This continual process of self-expression...is culturally and historically embedded, but this does not render the subject passive before determining social forces. Subjectivity is two-fold—both subjection and self-expression. Such performances and productions of sexed embodiment, she insists, always exceeds anatomical determination, establishing agency and direction in the cultural formation and signification of sexual relationships.32

In brief, what we know about gender from contemporary theory prevents us from fixing the categories either as biological or socio-historical in isolation from the other, but as performances in which both are constantly refigured.33

Ward uses this concept of performativity to propose two points of departure for his re-reading of Barth. The first of these is a deepening of the understanding of how “male” and “female” are performed roles in a broad symbolic field in Barth’s theology of sexual difference. To reiterate, for Barth sexual difference is not primarily a question of biology, but of theology: I-Thou, Self-Other, YHWH-Israel, and Christ-Church. These broader contexts allow the “body” to be opened up for increasingly profound levels of meaning, which allegedly have “nothing” to do with sexual difference per se.34 Second, for Butler the body not only participates in these performances, but begins to identify itself as the person represented by these performances.35 In other words, we begin to believe the stories we tell ourselves, and make life imitate art. In terms of theology, we learn how to be Christians by internalizing the performances of that identity.36

This links with Balthasar’s notion that Christian personhood is found insofar as it is linked with Christ’s persona dramatis in the theo-drama.37 What Ward omits to note here is the particular effect this piece of Butler’s thought has on the analogia fidei in Barth. If these identities are performative—insofar as bodily performance redounds to identification—it seems like any

32 Ward, Cities of God, 195.
33 Ibid., 196.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 197.
Glossolalia

theological concept that finds expression in gender is linked with that gender through a performance, by which the concept becomes embodied. This would mean that the relationship actually is, as Barth virulently denied, an *analogia entis*.38

And yet, despite Barth’s claim that “male” and “female” are but semiotic positions in a broader symbolic system, that divine command “frees man and woman from the self-imposed compulsion of...systemization,”39 Ward demonstrates how Barth continues to define sexual difference only in terms of biology. Male and female are viewed in a complementarian framework, but primarily for the benefit of the male’s completion and only secondarily for the female’s. This is misogynistic and heterosexist logic, to say the least, and Ward makes this explicitly clear: not only is the female eternally in an inferior position vis-à-vis the male, but also they are the exclusive complements one of another.40 Homosexuality then is forbidden because the male (or by analogy the female, though Barth here characteristically only speaks of the female in reference to the male) finds his wrong “mate,” in a disturbing theology akin to P.D. Eastman’s children’s book *Are You My Mother?* In the end, the system slips back into an *analogia entis*: “Barth returns to an affirmation of a natural and social order (orders highly convenient to him, serviced as he was by two women) that runs contrary to his theological thesis that there is no independent natural or social order to which appeal can be made.”41

The note here about Barth’s being serviced by two women brings up an interesting question: does Barth’s complementarianism (which already undercuts the *analogia fidei*), predicated on monogamy, leave his own particular relationship(s) unredeemed by his theological system? If human marriage images ontological difference, with Karl as YHWH/Jesus/male and Nelly as Israel/Church/female, who is Charlotte? Does she get left out? Is she the Virgin Mary? The Buddha? Secular philosophy? It appears, as Marcella Althus-Reid

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38 There is obviously a significant amount more that could and should be said on this topic in particular, but that lies outside of the both the purview and limitations of this particular paper.
39 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 153.
41 Ibid.
would suggest, that “many other friends and lovers may be hidden in the closets of each person of the Trinity.”  

We will return to this, but for the meantime, Ward calls Barth’s bluff here, and shows that this misogyny and homophobia are not connected with the symbolics or rooted in an analogy fidei, but springs from Barth’s own understanding of biological complementarianism.

Ward is left to ask, “What has happened? What has led Barth to reaffirm the socio-sexual status quo?” in a way that presages my own version of that question to him. Ward diagnoses Barth’s problem using Luce Irigaray’s now famous hom(m)osexuality. It is sexual difference only as construed by masculinist logic, in which the woman is “excluded both at the site in which she is represented, and also as the condition for which representation is to happen” that is operative in Barth and, according to Ward, has led to this slippage in the analogy fidei.

He wants difference. He wants sexual difference to be paradigmatic of the radically, unassimilable difference between I and Thou, Self and Other, Y[HWH] and Israel, Christ and His Church. But he reads this sexual difference from the male perspective. Though he voices a respect for the feminine, she is defined only in relation to what the male lacks—she is the helpmeet for him. His other is not really another at all. It is the other of the same...

Thus, in Ward’s eyes, the failure of Barth to follow through is based on his own hom(m)osexual logic that collapses sexual difference into complementarianism. One cannot find meaningful difference when one is only looking to a figment of one’s imagination whose sole purpose is to restore a perceived lack from an original completeness. This, though, is precisely what Barth is proposing in the second point of Barth’s theology of sexual difference that Ward identifies above: “man” [Mensch] as both male and female. While Barth claims to be merely expounding the creation narratives in Genesis 1-4, he is actually re-staging Plato’s Symposium in a Judeo-Christian system. And as we noted on this second point, just as in the Symposium, in Freud, and

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43 Ibid.
44 It is a particular disservice to this term to try to parse it and give it a fixed definition. Ward’s own one-sentence definition here is a case in point. Nevertheless, I refer the reader to Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, trans. Gilliam C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).
46 Ward, Cities of God, 198.
in Lacan, the man swallows the woman in order to return to this primordial wholeness. In Barth’s framework, Adam is on the search to find his missing rib-phal?us.

Ward sees this ultimately issuing from the dichotomy of eros and agape set up at the beginning. Within the context of Barth’s sociological and ecclesiological consideration of eros, Ward sees this developing into a hom(m)osexual economy: one fueled by a masculine lack which can never provide the difference it needs to fuel desire.\(^47\) In this economy, the divine has no place: “Where does the Holy Spirit of agapic desire enter into this self-fulfilling erotic economy? Where does the economy of God’s desire enter this homosexual economy to disrupt it and keep it open, in hope for fulfillment in Christ?”\(^48\) The answer, of course, is nowhere. The logic of lack cannot be disrupted, cannot be redeemed, because there is no room for a divine eros between the persons of the Trinity.

In order to refigure sexual difference beyond this hom(m)osexuality, Ward moves to revised version of Barth’s third point (marriage as covenant) so that marriage becomes a question of divine kenosis and human erotics. Ward returns again to concept of performativity here to indicate that our embodied performances become texts, narratives, which are socially situated and open to evaluation. Gesturing towards Butler and de Lauretis’s work on narratives, Ward notes how male and female characters serve only as nodes in a thick web of signification that transcends any clear essentialism. What drive all of these narratives are economies that cannot be readily delineated into agape-like and eros-like forms of desire. The more important questions are concerned with what the nature of the gender and the gendered experience are. “Same-sex” relationships, for Ward, are key in troubling heterosexist logics and demonstrating desire that is not based on a too-easily universalizable biological complementarianism. Rather, by recognizing how alterity is operative in what society calls “homosexuality” puts into relief, not only the place of “gay” and “lesbian” people in marriage, but recognizes that love is about

\(^47\) Ibid.
\(^48\) Ibid., 198-9; Ward wants to point out that same-sex relationships are not “homosexual” (i.e. love of the same) because there is still difference between the parties.
difference, not complementarianism: “What is loved in love is difference. Such love of difference, in difference, from difference, to difference, operates according the economies of both kenotic and erotic desire.”

“Finally!” Ward thinks, “We have found difference in both kenotic and sexual desire.” God’s outpouring of love to humanity now understood on the same engine as inter-human love, as across difference in “all” its forms. So now, “the Church must sanctify genuine sexual difference through its liturgies—whether that sexual difference is evident between two women, two men or a man and a woman.”

Towards A Trinitarian Erotic Community

But is that all the work that needs to be done here? Let us return for a moment to the point made above on the imago Dei as portrayed by Barth, and echoed by Ward, as two rather than three. Ward’s “corrective” to Barth reveals that Ward does not wish to question the basic trinitarian model he gives. Rather he wants to tweak the image slightly so that human erotics can be taken up by “a trinitarian erotics in which true difference between the first and second Person is maintained by the second difference of the Spirit. The Spirit keeps open, while maintaining the unity of, the trinitarian relations of love.”

We can map this as follows:

Father

human₁

Son

human₂

Spirit

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49 Ibid, 201.
50 Ibid., 202.
51 Ibid., 199.
The operation of the “taking up” here is a function of the Spirit’s role in subtending the interval, not only of ontological difference but the Father–Son gap, as well; the inter-human erotics get brought into the Trinity through the Spirit. We can see in this model, though, that the “Personhood” of the Spirit is weak, or is at least of a very different kind than either Father or Son. The Spirit becomes the “place” for the Father and the Son’s becoming, but has no place of its own, to take a cue from Irigaray.\(^5\) If we take this to its full expression, the Spirit seems to be the subpar (dare we say “sinful”?) Person. If this is the model use for sexual difference, the Spirit becomes the mistress of the Father–Son relationship. One cannot help but see this as a biographical account of Barth’s own life, as his own relationships are illustrative of how such double binarism in the Trinity becomes problematic. Dyadism is not a sufficient account for an equal, reciprocal relationship between the trinitarian persons—one may hold this position, but it is not Nicene Christianity. Neither is it a stable model for sexual difference and human relationality.

We may turn then to ontological difference for this mapping, as did Ward and Barth. On Ward’s last point on his hom(m)osexual diagnosis of Barth’s theology of sexual difference, he says:

\begin{quote}
Man precedes, woman follows after, Barth writes (III.4, 167-172), while maintaining that this “does not mean any inner inequality between those who stand in this succession” (III.4, 170). The problem is the “equality” is always being gauged from a male, homosexual (Irigaray’s “hom(m)osexual”) perspective. The relation he wants between the I and Thou, the Self and Other, Israel and Y[HWH], the Church and Christ is where the latter ruptures the autonomy of the former, questioning the authority and privilege of the former. But the hierarchy of male/female relation means that the female (though in some sense other) is in no position to question.\(^5\)
\end{quote}

The issue with configuring marriage in terms of ontological difference is not only that it only permits of two, in an unexamined dyadism, but also that the relationship across ontological difference is not a neutral or equal one, no matter what perspective we take. Israel is not the helpmeet of God, but his adulterous, whoring wife in the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic corpus.

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Church is not the partner of Christ, but an obeisant body that must constantly be corrected and redeemed from its sin by its perfect and perfecting Head; she may be the bride of Christ, but she is one who must submit to her husband. Covenant as figured in the Bible is *always* hierarchical, not only in terms of arrangement, but also of power and moral worth. To frame marriage, whether “samegender” or “oppositegender,” in terms of ontological difference renders an understanding of relationality that can never be based on mutuality. The question will always be who maps YHWH/Christ/“male”, for Lacan who has and who is the phallus, or as the heterosexist cliché towards queer people has it: “Who wears the pants?”

To do what Ward initially sets out to do, to provide a “critique of the marriage liturgy, and the place, politics, and ideology of such heterosexism within Christian dogmatic thinking and ecclesial practice,” we must look not just beyond heterosexism as it stands against homosexuality, but also as it stands against yet queerer forms of relation. What Ward provides us at the end of his argument is a model by which gay men and lesbians can get “straight married.” A critique of heterosexism on the scale Ward announces, it is not. But there are seeds in Ward’s argument of a fuller critique, lines of thought that he leaves on the wayside.

First, in terms of the eschatology of desire, Ward says: “But within this eschatological and matrimonial horizon other forms of relations—friendships and a variety of different partnerships—evidence lines of communication and communion within the Church as an erotic community.” Within the Church, it is not only explicitly sexual relationships that are recognized as participating in an erotic economy, but rather other forms of relationality, too. In fact, it is the very opening up of marriage into an eschatological horizon that allows this forms of relationality to be recognized as erotic, as participating in desire across lines of difference that create love. Love in the Greek division was not just eros and agape; we are missing desire as expressed in *philia* (friendship) and *storge* (kinship)—though it may be argued that the latter is

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54 Ibid., 182.
55 Ibid., 187.
included in agape when it comes to the Trinity. In the same way that eros is confined to an inferior position in Barth’s thought, *philia* and *storge* are not seen in either Barth or Ward’s schemas as “real relationality,” not even worth mentioning except in passing, only unearthed once marriage becomes a horizon.

A second site for a further expansion of Ward’s model comes in his last paragraph, which I will reproduce in full:

> The sanctification of such unions, along with the celebration of relationality *per se*—of friendships and neighbourliness, of kinship (by both blood and law), of colleagues and coworkers—becomes the means for the kenosis and enrichment of the Church as the erotic community. Founded and refounded continually upon its Eucharistic site—upon the dynamics of fracture, union and dispersal—sexual difference participates analogically in trinitarian difference, while maintaining the ontological difference which enables the suspension of all that is and becomes in this world within the perfection of God’s own transcendent being.56

Questions remain as to how exactly the participation of sexual difference within trinitarian difference “maintains the ontological difference,” a point that Ward makes here without much support. Nevertheless, I must ask why this vision does not make its way into the rest of Ward’s argument, but is only tagged on as a coda after he finishes his lukewarm argument expanding straight marriage to gay men and lesbians? Why do these other relationships, which also become means of kenosis, not get taken up in the “recognize and sanctify difference wherever it is found” argument? Why is it here, and only here, where we can see sexual difference as mapping the Trinity, not in clusters of dyads, but in desire between and among multiple persons. If what is being blessed in marriage is love, love of difference—and even among “homosexuals” there is alterity—then why short-circuit the marital horizon when it reaches two? Might not Barth’s *ménage à trois* be a fuller reflection of the Trinity after all? Might not a trinitarian model of relationality give Barth a way of expressing a non-Malthusian love, a love that does not require a secret lover in the closet? Following Althaus-Reid, might we not give a way for Barth to re-figure his own troubled relationality, a way out of his own closet?

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56 Ibid., 202.
Bibliography


