

Trinity, Time, and Church, edited by Colin E. Gunton

reviewed by [Roderick T. Leupp](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

By any measure--longevity, productivity, respect, acuity--Robert W. Jenson is a great theologian. His two recent volumes of systematic theology, marked by lyric beauty and dialectic power, will be read long after the current revival of the genre has ended. His distinguished writing career is now almost 40 years old, beginning with an early immersion in Barthian theology and including later forays into trinitarianism and sacramental theology. Perhaps he would say that his favorite book is the one about Jonathan Edwards, although confessionally Jenson is Lutheran, not Calvinist.

Such a noteworthy body of theological thought deserves the kind of response offered by the 21 essays collected in this volume. Their authors, the likes of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Geoffrey Wainwright, would together comprise one of the world's best theological faculties. Each writer brings his or her own theological scrutiny and specialization to Jenson's work. The point is neither to regurgitate Jenson nor to supersede him. These responses are measured, considered, probing and respectful. Some tend toward the macro, tracing big themes throughout Jenson's career; others are less ambitious and consequently more nuanced.

The three theological moments listed in the title--Trinity, time and church--are never far from view, regardless of the respondents' own theological interests. The geographical and confessional range of the essayists is an homage to Jenson's own theological vision, which takes in Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic and Orthodox perspectives.

The eastward face of Jenson's theology shows in two particular areas. His trinitarianism is heavily influenced by the Cappadocian Fathers, who got the "God entering time" aspect of trinitarian thinking just right: the God of the Bible willingly enters time in order to redeem it. Eastern therapeutic theology, which culminates in the resurrection in ways that Anselm's theology cannot, represents Jenson's soteriology. Given these Eastern affinities, it is a strange omission that no Orthodox

appear among the essayists. Jaroslav Pelikan, formerly Lutheran but now Orthodox, would bring the best of both of these worlds to this book.

Biblical, liturgical, historical and constructive theologians, as well as theological ethicists, evaluate Jenson's richly textured theology. That the book includes no philosophical theologians may reflect Jenson's own theological sensibilities. His perspective is ecclesial and narrative rather than speculative or philosophical. As a whole, Jenson's theology is perhaps the best recent step taken toward reuniting that long-fractured pair of doxological/spiritual and critical/academic theology. To say that his thought is "respectably, but never merely, academic" is a nice summation.

In both style and content these essays are deep and fluid. For the most part they emulate Jenson's concern that Christian theology be thoughtful, well stated, and always mindful of its service to the church. There are more than a few hints here of Schleiermacher's dictum that practical theology is the crown jewel of all theology. To describe either these essays or Jenson's own theology as "preachable" may be saying too much, but Jenson's theological analyses of culture are penetrating in a way that every preacher would do well to study.

The full-throated classical bent of Jenson's theology takes the reader back to Irenaeus and Augustine and away from Sallie McFague and James Cone. Likewise, these essays seldom address the issues that largely define today's theological landscape--process, liberationist and feminist constructions. But Jenson is no obscurantist. His is a theology not for its own sake but for the church in ministry to the world.

John Updike once observed that theology stands in need of constant revision, needing to be unraveled and knitted again in every generation. In his own way Jenson does just that, using the resources of ancient and medieval theology (one essayist thinks his *Systematic Theology* is neo-Thomistic) to address contemporary cultural problems. *Trinity, Time, and Church* performs three valuable services. It is at once a searchlight illuminating Jenson's historical sources, a mirror reflecting his enduring accomplishment, and a window showing the world a better theological future.