Aspects of God’s Relationship to the World in the Theologies of Jurgen Moltmann, Bonaventure and Jonathan Edwards

DON SCHWEITZER
St. Andrew's College, University of Saskatchewan

This paper studies how Jurgen Moltmann, Bonaventure, and Jonathan Edwards use the notion that God’s goodness is self-diffusive and the doctrine of the trinity to understand why God created the world and what this means to God. It first examines Moltmann’s theology, noting some problems in his thought. It then looks at how Bonaventure’s approach avoids these while creating others. This is followed by Edwards’ utilization of the notion of moral necessity and a more complex understanding of infinity to provide a more coherent understanding than the other two, while incorporating insights present in the thought of both.

The biblical witness poses a challenge to Christian theologians trying to understand God’s relationship to the world. Most biblical traditions describe God as having a power of being qualitatively different from and greater than all that exists in time and space (Miller 1998, 230–231). God precedes creation and is not dependent upon it. Yet biblical traditions also speak of God as affected by creation and what happens in and to it (Welker 1999, 10, 12–13). Some speak of actions in history having the potential to bring a fulfillment to God (Painter 2002, 281–287). The biblical witness thus describes God as being both internally related to creation, affected by its existence, and radically transcendent to it. The question is, how to affirm both in a coherent manner?

Affirming both is necessary because each empowers moral action in different ways. God’s transcendence is key to God being a source of hope and meaning. Only a God who can create out of nothing and bring into being a new creation can overcome radical evil (Adams...
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1999, 83–84). God's internal relatedness to creation, the difference that creation and human activity can make to God, is also an important moral source (Wolterstorff 1987, 20) that can provide the basis for a stance of deep ecology without falling into an anti-humanism (Schweitzer 2004, 10–15). In order to faithfully reflect these two aspects of the Biblical witness and provide as rich a moral source as possible, Christian theologians need to seek a coherent understanding of God as both radically transcendent and internally related to creation.

For centuries divine transcendence was understood in ways that denied that the world makes any difference to God. Many modern relational theologies stress instead God's internal relatedness to creation, yet without a genuine sense of divine transcendence (Tracy 1994, 40–41). Overcoming this dichotomy between a transcendent God lacking relationality and a relational God lacking transcendence has been a central concern of theologians exploring the relationships of the natural sciences to Christian theology (Clayton and Peacocke, 2004) and in the renewal of trinitarian theology (Grenz 2004, 222) in the twentieth century. Panentheism, the idea that "the world is contained within God; yet ... is not identical to God" (Clayton 1997, 88–119; Tracy 1994, 41) has been advocated as a solution in both discussions.

A particular feature of the renewal of trinitarian theology has been the attempt to develop an understanding of why God acts to create and redeem the world that avoids this dichotomy. The question is important, for the intelligibility of an action depends upon there being a reason for it (Taylor 1985, 29–35). If one cannot say why God would create and redeem the world, these actions remain unintelligible or are construed as happening arbitrarily, in a way that conflicts with the Biblical witness to the moral character of God (Hanson 1999, 458). Yet if the meaning of creation and redemption is understood in a way that makes the world ontologically necessary to God, a loss of divine transcendence ensues.

Jürgen Moltmann has participated in both these discussions. He has attempted to overcome this dichotomy by a panentheistic understanding of God (Moltmann 1974, 255–256). He employs the notion that God's goodness is inherently communicative and the doctrine of the
trinity to understand why God acts to create and redeem the world. What follows will argue that Moltmann's understanding undermines God's aseity. But by looking at the way these ideas are used in the theologies of Bonaventure and Jonathan Edwards, we will show how this can be avoided, and how these ideas can contribute to overcoming a significant incoherency in Christian thought.

**Moltmann on the “why” of creation**

In the first volume of his Messianic theology, Moltmann argued that God created the world because it is the nature of God's love to seek to communicate itself to an "Other" (Moltmann 1981, 55). Prior to creation God's love was communicated and reciprocated between the persons of the immanent trinity. As a communication of like to like, their love for each other is necessary. However, God's love desires to express itself in a more free and creative manner. In order to do so it must communicate itself beyond the necessary inner trinitarian relationships to what is like to it in an Other who is essentially different. For this to happen, "God 'needs' the world" and humanity (Moltmann 1981, 58). Thus according to Moltmann, the divine nature is characterized by an eros, a desire for communion with an Other that cannot be fulfilled within the immanent trinity.

In positing this Moltmann was attempting to continue Karl Barth's revision of the tradition of classical theism in Western Christian thought and correct a deep-seated ambiguity in Barth's own theology (Moltmann 1981, 55). Barth affirmed that there is no caprice in God, that God's decision to create and redeem the world is grounded in the nature of God's love. But he also stated that God did not need to do this, that God's being is not affected by it and that God could have done otherwise (Schweitzer 2002, 236–237). By positing an unfulfilled eros for relationship within the immanent trinity, Moltmann provides a basis for saying how the world makes a difference to God and why God acts to create and redeem it. However, where there is an unfulfilled nature or desire, there is a form of suffering. In laying the basis for God's internal relatedness to creation in this way, Moltmann posits a lack or suffering within the divine nature that compels God
This creates an ambiguity in Moltmann's theology because he also seeks to affirm God's radical transcendence to creation, so that God is a source of hope for the final overcoming of evil (Moltmann 1985, 79). To this end he describes creation as resulting from a free and uncoerced decision on God's part (Moltmann 1985, 85). Yet as noted above, elsewhere he argues that the communication of God's love to creation is necessary for the fulfillment of God's nature, and so is not wholly free. Moltmann at times denies this, arguing that God's actions ad extra result not from a deficiency of being but from the self-diffusive nature of God's love (Moltmann 1985, 84). Following Pseudo-Dionysius, he sees the perfection of God's love to lie in its inherent tendency towards further creative expression (Moltmann 1981, 58). A love which did not further communicate itself to an 'Other' would be less perfect than one that does. As perfect, God's love is by nature communicative in this way. But Moltmann does posit a deficiency in the divine being in arguing that this perfection of the divine love cannot be fulfilled within the immanent trinity. God's internal relatedness to creation thus has two roots in his thought. The first is the self-diffusive nature of God's love. The second is a lack of Otherness within the immanent trinity. The second combined with the first makes the world ontologically necessary for God to experience fulfillment. As a result, God does not love ad extra freely, but in order to fulfill what is lacking within the divine life. If there is a nominalistic fringe to Barth's doctrine of God that makes God's decision to create and redeem somewhat arbitrary (Moltmann 1981, 52), in Moltmann's theology there is a deficiency in the divine being that makes creation and redemption necessary for God to experience fulfillment and peace.

This ambiguity surfaces again in the second volume of Moltmann's Messianic theology, where he returns to the questions of why and how God created the world. Here Moltmann writes that there is "no external necessity which occasions" the creation of the world and "no inner compulsion which could determine it" (Moltmann 1985, 74). Creation results from God's "eternal, infinite love, which in the creative process issues in its overflowing rapture from its trinitarian perfection
and completeness" (Moltmann 1985, 84). Yet the idea that God’s love needs such further expressions for fulfillment is repeated when Moltmann goes on to state that the divine love “comes to itself in the eternal rest of the Sabbath” (Moltmann 1985, 84). Because this is only possible as a result of creation and redemption, these actions are necessary for the God’s love to find fulfilment, or come to itself.

These other statements, which make God dependent upon creation, undermine Moltmann’s affirmations of divine transcendence (Sontag 1962, 105). This in turn undercuts his attempt to develop an understanding of God that will have an efficacious influence on human behaviour (Moltmann 1981, 191–192), as one must affirm God as both genuinely free and internally related to creation if God is to function as a healthy model for the self (Johnson 1992, 226). By making creation ontologically necessary to God, Moltmann portrays God as modeling dependency rather than freely chosen relatedness in a way that is detrimental to women and men.

**Moltmann on the “how” of creation**

Moltmann’s affirmations of divine transcendence are undermined again by his argument that for God to create, God’s infinite being must be constricted to create a space for creation (Moltmann 1981, 109) in a way that is humiliating for God. At times he argues that this only causes suffering for God when the empty space created by God’s self-constriction is turned by the “self-isolation of created beings” into “God-forsaken space” (Moltmann 1985, 88). But self-humiliation as a loss of dignity and self-respect always involves a kind of suffering. Elsewhere he explicitly states in regard to the act of creation that creative “love is always suffering love,” (Moltmann 1981, 59) and that God suffers as a result of the “otherness of the other” (Moltmann 1974, 230). As Katherine Tanner notes, this way of contrasting the divine being directly with creation so that the divine being must make room for creation to exist, brings God “down to the level of the world and the beings within it in virtue of that very opposition” (Tanner 1988, 45). In arguing against this, Tanner overlooks that as God’s will can be disobeyed, the divine and the created can in some ways contrast

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quite directly. Yet her insight is correct that when God and creation are construed as existing on a continuum of being such that the first must make way for the second to exist, God becomes “imprisoned by a transcendence negatively defined” (Tanner 1988, 158). The creative potential of God becomes limited by the being of the world and restricted to what is possible within the present structures of creation.

In his discussion of why God creates, Moltmann argued that God’s being lacks within itself the Otherness needed for the free and creative expression of God’s love. There, there was not enough in the divine being. Here in his discussion of how God creates, there is too much of it. The divine being takes up all space and must be constricted to make room for the Other that God’s love seeks. In both discussions God’s being is portrayed as lacking or conflicting with what God’s love needs. The result is that suffering becomes inevitable for God. Either God’s love suffers a lack of fulfillment, or it is fulfilled through the suffering of God’s being.

The Efficacy of Divine love in history

Moltmann’s argument that God’s love finds fulfillment through suffering has two roots. One is his identification of Jesus’ suffering and death as the paradigmatic expression of how God’s love is creatively expressed (Moltmann 1985, 89–90). Moltmann argues that all God’s salvific actions follow this pattern of suffering leading to exaltation (Moltmann 1985, 89–90). He describes this as “active suffering,” that God freely chooses to undergo. But as shown above, there is an element of compulsion here. If God must create and redeem the world to experience fulfillment and if God’s being is such that the existence of the world causes God suffering, then God is compelled to suffer in order to fulfill God’s nature as love.

A second source of Moltmann’s idea that God’s love finds fulfillment through suffering is his contrastive characterization of divine transcendence in relation to creation, outlined earlier. Because Moltmann describes God’s being and creation as existing on a continuum of being, the scope of God’s creative activity is reduced to seeking a response from humanity without violating its integrity (Moltmann 2003, 63).

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Moltmann argues that God does this by patiently suffering the sin and evil of the world (Moltmann 1981, 59–60). It is by the holy undergoing the humiliation and suffering that the existence of the finite Other brings that a relationship enhancing both is created. In eternity God creates the possibility of creation by self-humiliating self-constriction. Within history God creates the possibility of salvation by patient suffering. God’s transcendence becomes defined as God’s ability to suffer and endure human sin and alienation.

Elizabeth Johnson argues that this way of construing God’s power is dangerous for women because it makes suffering “a value in itself,” and so creates “a trap that ensnares women’s struggle for equality and full humanity” (Johnson 1992, 253, 304 n.21). Moltmann might argue that he does not describe divine suffering as a value in itself, but as the means to a salvific end. Yet there is a significant lacuna in his thought here. As Johnson points out, God’s sharing human suffering overcomes one aspect of it, but not all. Hope does not come simply from God suffering. It comes from a radically transcendent God, whose power of being as love is greater than that of anything else, entering fully into the suffering of the human condition and overcoming it (Johnson 1992, 268). Both God’s solidarity and God’s transcendence are essential to God being a source of hope, for the transcendence of God’s love provides the principle of expectation that in the end the conditions of suffering and the causes of evil will be overcome. In his later theology Moltmann describes this transcendence as the ability of God to endure suffering experienced and caused by the world (Moltmann 1974, 277). Yet he never explains how God’s enduring this overcomes the causes of suffering. That God endures suffering does not necessarily effect a change in what causes it. If God simply endures sin and evil, what is to prevent these from continuing indefinitely?

Here two important differences become apparent between Moltmann’s understanding of divine transcendence in *Theology of Hope* (Moltmann 1967) and in subsequent works. First, in *Theology of Hope*, he described the identity of the risen Christ as an identity in contradiction, in which the cross and resurrection conflicted with each other, so that the cross could not be reduced to a preliminary of the
resurrection (Moltmann 1967, 198–200). But in The Crucified God and subsequently, the new reality manifest in Jesus' resurrection is described as resulting from the suffering experienced by the trinity in his death (Moltmann 1974, 244–245). Jesus' cross no longer stands in contradiction to his resurrection, but leads to it. God's ability to endure suffering thus becomes the way divine transcendence is expressed in history.

Second, in Theology of Hope Moltmann argued that a reversal of subjects had taken place in the economy of salvation when the fulfillment of God's promises were said to depend on people's response to them. God's promises then became objects that could be manipulated and the basis for their fulfillment shifted from divine to human agency (Moltmann 1967, 123). Moltmann's argument that God's ability to suffer is the power by which God effects salvation leads to a similar reversal in his own thought. He argues that God's "suffering patience," which can endure anything while waiting for a positive response from women and men (Moltmann 2001, 149; 2003, 65, 186), is the power by which God keeps history open and effects change in it. Moltmann describes this patient suffering as "the most powerful action, because it has time" (Moltmann 2001, 149). God would rather suffer patiently than coerce people into righteousness. Here the reversal of subjects in the economy of salvation that he criticized earlier occurs in his own thought, for salvation now depends upon the response of people to God. Furthermore, God is not the only one suffering in history. The argument that God tolerates evil for the sake of human freedom overlooks that as divine patience respects the freedom of those perpetrating evil, it fails to protect their victims (Adams 1999, 34–55). Earlier Moltmann argued that no explanation should be given for suffering, because any explanation would only legitimate it (Moltmann 1979, 77). Yet here he has done just that.

This reduction of divine transcendence to patient suffering out of respect for human freedom leads Moltmann to a position similar to Origen's. Both suggest that salvation ultimately depends upon the free choice of created beings in response to God. However, when salvation depends upon the exercise of fallen freedom, the hope that evil will be
overcome becomes uncertain. If there is no creative action on God's part altering the fallen human condition, there is no reason why people who respond positively to God's communication might not turn away again (Tillich 1968, 61), or simply fail to respond in the first place.

Moltmann's argument that God's transcendence is present in history as God's patient suffering also overlooks the tension, noted in *Theology of Hope* (Moltmann 1967, 197–202), between Jesus' cross and resurrection. Jesus' resurrection resulted from a new creative act of God, which vindicated him over against the suffering he experienced (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1994, 112, 123–127). This makes it a hope-creating interruption in relation to the cross and what the cross represents. In light of the resurrection, early Christians came to see Jesus' death as having saving significance. But they continued to view his resurrection as fundamentally a vindication of him and his message over against his suffering and death. The discontinuity between the two remains, and functions as the basis of hope for the final overcoming of evil (Johnson 1992, 269). In *Theology of Hope* Moltmann articulated this by describing Jesus' identity as an identity in contradiction (Moltmann 1967, 202). But his later descriptions of the efficacy of divine suffering and of Jesus' death as leading to his resurrection have lost sight of this.

The interruptive aspect of the resurrection reveals the freedom of God to act creatively to overcome evil. This is undermined from *The Crucified God* on as God's suffering is described as the means by which God creates salvation and as God's transcendence is described contrastively to creation, so that undergoing suffering becomes the way God must act to effect salvation and find fulfilment. As God needs to create and communicate to an Other in order to experience fulfilment, and as this can only happen through divine suffering, suffering becomes intrinsic to the divine life. At this point it ceases to be an excellence or virtue (Johnson 1992, 266), something God freely undertakes, and becomes instead a fate to which God is subject. Moltmann describes God's suffering as the voluntary suffering of love (Moltmann 1974, 230). But God's suffering is not really voluntary if God needs the world to experience fulfillment and if creating the world and communicating to it require suffering on God's part. Understood in this way, God does not
come to a suffering world from beyond it, but exists under the same conditions as it, so that suffering is an unavoidable aspect of life and love for both. This undermines divine transcendence and Christian hope, for if God is necessarily subject to suffering, what is the basis for believing that it will ever be finally overcome? In the end Moltmann reduces the central paradox of the gospel (Tillich 1957, 92) from a radically transcendent God suffering freely for the salvation of creation, to God suffering of necessity. Having established this and noted problems arising from it, we turn to analyze how Bonaventure and Edwards understood God’s relation to creation.

**Bonaventure**

Like Moltmann, Bonaventure (1217–1274 CE) also described God’s goodness as inherently communicative. But for Bonaventure, this aspect of God’s nature finds full expression in the immanent trinity. The communication of God’s love here is necessary, as God’s goodness must express itself to fulfill the divine nature. Yet while necessary, this does not happen apart from the divine will freely assenting to it. According to Bonaventure, the trinitarian processions through which this communication takes place occur as the will of the first person of the trinity reflects upon the divine goodness and assents to its further expression, out of joy in its perfection (Gilson 1965, 163). This involvement of the divine will means that an element of freedom and creativity is present as God’s love is expressed and communicated in the engendering of the Word and the procession of the Spirit. These expressions are necessary to fulfill the communicative nature of God’s goodness. But as they happen through the conjunction of the divine will and nature, they occur through free and creative action that gives rise to difference within the Godhead. As an expression of God’s love, the Son is like the first person of the trinity but also distinct. The same is true of the Holy Spirit. This leads Bonaventure to recognize, unlike Moltmann, that an element of Otherness is already present in the immanent trinity, for the inner trinitarian relations are like to like, but not same to same. As a result, the self-diffusive nature of the divine love can be perfectly fulfilled within the Godhead through its free and creative expression.
amongst the persons of the trinity (Bonaventure 1970, 163). For this reason creation and redemption are not needed for God's love to fully express itself, and so are not ontologically necessary for God.

However, Bonaventure argues that God's decision to create the world was not arbitrary. The divine love fully expressed within the trinity is open to further expression in "a temporally and spatially limited way in creation" (Bonaventure 1970, 113). Creation and redemption are further finite actualizations of what is already infinitely expressed within the trinity. In "engendering the Son, the Father expresses Himself wholly and eternally produces the ideas, the origin of which is thus traced to the original productivity of Being," so that the creation of the world "is only a new manifestation of this diffusion of divine goodness" (Gilson 1965, 165) already actual within the immanent trinity in the generation of the Son. This means that God is in no way compelled to create the world by a lack or unfulfilled desire. Yet the act of creation, while free, is in keeping with the divine nature and a further expression of it (Keane 1975, 113–117). This goes a long way towards overcoming the indeterminacy in Western theology around the 'why?' of creation that has resulted from radical affirmations of divine transcendence. The nominalistic fringe Moltmann detects in Barth's theology is gone, yet not at the cost of making creation ontologically necessary for God.

But in keeping with the Biblical witness that God experiences something new and receives from creation, Moltmann insists that the world and what happens in and to it make a difference to God (Moltmann 1996, 319). For Bonaventure, this is not really true. On the understanding that "the goodness of a creature adds nothing to that of the Creator, because the finite adds nothing to the infinite" (Bonaventure 1970, 163; Tavard 1954, 159–160), he concluded that the existence of the world does not affect God. Because Bonaventure simply contrasted the divine nature as infinite to creation as finite, God's involvement with the world lessens, as God is unable to receive from it. Consequently Bonaventure's affirmation of creation's goodness remains somewhat ambivalent (Santmire 1985, 101–104). Bonaventure avoids the contrastive characterization of God to creation that Tanner

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criticizes, but he employs a contrastive characterization of another sort, positing a qualitative distinction between the two so that God is not internally related to the world, as the world can make no difference to God. As Moltmann argues, this has the effect of emptying creation of value and undercutting the glory of God that it was meant to explain (Moltmann 1996, 325). A God who cannot receive from creation is not very glorious.

Bonaventure's focus on the self-diffusive nature of divine goodness relates God to the world in a way that provides a motive and impetus for creation (Keane 1975, 117–120). Yet the gospel remains somewhat enigmatic as long as God is not understood as internally related to creation (McFague 1993, 136). Positing God as fully actual in the trinity as Bonaventure did is generally seen to rule this out. But Jonathan Edwards argued that this is not so. God as already perfect and complete in eternity can be described as receiving from creation, in part through a more complex understanding of divine infinity.

Jonathan Edwards

Like Moltmann and Bonaventure, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) also used the idea that God's goodness is inherently self-diffusive and the doctrine of the trinity to understand God's relationship to creation. Like Bonaventure, he argued that the communicative aspect of God's love is fully expressed freely and creatively within the immanent trinity. However Edwards did not describe God's transcendence to the world simply in contrastive terms. According to Edwards, God and creation do not exist on a continuum of being (Edwards 1994, 334–335). Edwards frequently used a finite/infinite distinction to describe their relationship. But he worked with a more complex notion of infinity than Bonaventure that enabled him to describe God as both internally related and radically transcendent to creation.

A.W. Moore notes that two notions of infinity recur in Western thought. One is the metaphysical notion which understands the infinite as that which is complete, perfect, self-sufficient, unsurpassable and autonomous, in comparison to the finite, which is dependent, limited, surpassable and imperfect (Moore 2001, 46). The other is the
Schweitzer mathematical notion of the infinite as a quantitative term that can never be reached in history (Moore 2001, 35–40). While Bonaventure used only the first, Edwards employed both, using the infinite as a quantitative term that could be used to make a qualitative distinction, without ever losing its sublated quantitative meaning.

Edwards used the infinite as a quantitative term when he argued that God cannot “communicate all his goodness to a finite being” (Edwards 1994, 264) because God’s goodness is infinite. From this he concluded that God must be a trinity, for God’s infinite goodness can only be fully communicated from one divine person to another (Edwards 1994, 263–283). As Edwards does this, the quantitative relationship of finite to infinite becomes a qualitative or metaphysical distinction. In this way he exploits the argument that the mathematical infinite can never appear in history to make a metaphysical distinction between God in eternity and finite entities in time and space. However, Edwards immediately re-employs the mathematical meaning of infinity to place finite reality in a positive relationship to God. According to Edwards God created the world so that this communication within the trinity could continue in time and space through God’s love being further expressed and perceived by people (Edwards 1994, 272). Because God’s goodness is infinite and those to whom it is being communicated are finite, this process will continue “until eternity” (Edwards 1994, 275). In other words, it will never be complete. Though never complete, still this process “enlarges” (Edwards 1989, 461) the divine being and makes a genuine difference to God.

As Tanner argues, divine transcendence is diminished when defined contrastively to creation in a way that puts the two on a continuum of being. But if an unbridgeable chasm is posited as lying between the two as with Bonaventure, it becomes difficult to say how the divine can be internally related to creation. Edwards combined two notions of infinity to avoid these pitfalls. He posited a continuity of being between creator and creature that enables communication between them, as when he argued that “should the faculties of a person” be infinitely enlarged, “there would be the Deity to all intents and purposes” (Edwards 1994, 295). However, the metaphysical or qualitative distinction be-
tween creator and creature remains in place, as such a process of enlargement could never be completed, because the distance to the mathematical infinite, the axis along which this continuity lies, can never be fully traversed in time and space (Moore 2001, 40). Consequently the metaphysical distinction between finite and infinite can never be erased. Continuity exists between God and creation, but within an overarching discontinuity that preserves divine transcendence. Utilizing these two notions of infinity in this way helped Edwards say how God relates positively to or includes the finite, while remaining qualitatively distinct from it. This enabled him to speak of God as radically transcendent to creation, yet also open to receiving from it. Even more important to this were his use of a dispositional ontology and the doctrine of the trinity.

Building on the notion of habit as “an active tendency to behaviour of a certain kind” that has an abiding reality apart from its manifestation (Lee 1988, 17–18), Edwards conceived of dispositions as abiding principles that are not exhausted in their exercise, but which remain open to further actualization in appropriate circumstances. This enabled Edwards to understand God’s nature as a disposition to beauty that is at once fully actualized in the immanent trinity and yet also open to further expression in creation and redemption (Lee 1988, 173). Like Moltmann, Edwards sought to preserve the truth of both emanationist and decisionist notions of creation (Moltmann 1985, 79–86). He attempted this by arguing that as the expression of divine goodness is a good thing, there is an element of necessity to it arising from God’s identity as a moral agent. God’s disposition to beauty is already fully actualized in the inner-trinitarian relations of the immanent trinity prior to creation, so that God is infinite in the metaphysical sense used by Bonaventure. God is complete, self-sufficient, perfect, autonomous, and has no ontological need of creation.

However, the dispositional nature of the divine being is open to further expressions in time beyond its full actualization in eternity. Through these God is able to receive from creation. The divine nature has no ontological need of further expression, but as it is open to and capable of this, and as this is a good thing, it is morally necessary for
God in light of the values implicit in God's identity as loving and good. This does not diminish God's freedom in the way that making creation ontologically necessary to God does, because actions that are morally necessary occur as a result of a decision on an agent's part that is free of ontological compulsion (Edwards 1957, 156–162). As God's disposition to beauty is fully expressed in the immanent trinity, the further expression of this in time and space does not bring God anything qualitatively new. But the further repetition in time and space of what is already actual within the immanent trinity brings a quantitative increase to God's being (Lee 1988, 203).

If the world results from the tendency of God's own being, then what happens in the world does matter to God. God does not need the world ... to be God. God already is, and the world only repeats this. But the world matters to God as God's repetition or enlargement of ... [God's] own internal fullness.

(Thee 1999, 454)

Theologically, this repetition of divine beauty in time and space enlarges the divine being by quantitatively increasing the bond of love existing between the first two persons of the trinity. As the divine beauty is further expressed ad extra and perceived by finite persons, they repeat in their own limited way the love and joy shared by the first two persons of the trinity. As this bond of love is the Holy Spirit, this repetition in time and space of the love and joy shared within the trinity increases the being of God by increasing the being of the Holy Spirit. In this way the finite is placed in a positive relation to the infinite. It makes a limited but nonetheless real contribution to the infinite being of God, without being ontologically necessary to it.

For Bonaventure, such a repetition can add nothing to God because the metaphysical infinite cannot receive from the finite. But Edwards' combining of a mathematical with a metaphysical notion of infinity helps him articulate how this can happen. While the metaphysical notion of infinity contrasts with the finitude of creation, the mathematical notion of infinity includes it, as it is composed of an unending number of finite occasions. By applying these two notions of infinity

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to God's relationship to creation in this way, Edwards arrives at an un­
derstanding of divine infinity similar in some respects to Hegel's, who
argued that divine infinity "is not separate from or beyond the world
but includes it as its embodiment" (Taylor 1975, 240). For Edwards'
the finite can bring an increase to the whole as a means of further ex­
pressing in time and space the infinite beauty already fully expressed in
eternity. In Hegel's thought God is dependent on finite creation to be
fully actualized (Taylor 1975, 494). But in Edwards' thought, because
God is not dependent on finite creation in this fashion, God remains
free to give to creation in new and unexpected ways. Also, because the
expression in history of the divine disposition to beauty is a repetition
of what is already actual and whole in the immanent trinity, history is
not a meaningless conglomerate of finite occasions, but has order and
structure. God is thus internally related to the world without being
dependent on it in a way that compromises divine transcendence. In
this Edwards approximates a panentheistic model proposed in the dia­
logue of the natural sciences with Christian theology (Clayton 1997,
98–104). Yet Edwards goes further in providing a reason for why God
creates and redeems the world.

Edwards' formulation of these ideas also goes a long way towards
answering the question running through the recent renewal of trinitar­
ian theology (Grenz 2004, 222), of how the immanent and economic
trinities can be related so as to acknowledge the importance of the
latter without collapsing the two and compromising divine freedom.
Moltmann, Bonaventure and Edwards all posit the link between the
two partly in the self-diffusive nature of God's love. The additional
role played in Moltmann's theology by a lack in the divine being that
enables him to describe God as receiving from creation is filled in Ed­
wards' thought by the divine being's capability of increase. This leads
to the ontological necessity of God's love expressing itself through crea­
tion and redemption being replaced by a notion of moral necessity.
In this way Edwards is able to describe God as internally related to
creation without compromising or undermining God's transcendence,
and without positing a disjunction between God's nature as love and
God's being.

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God and the world

In some respects Moltmann's formulation of God's relationship to the world improves upon those of Bonaventure and Edwards. Yet Edwards's understanding of why God created the world and how God is transcendent and internally related to it has a coherency that Moltmann's lacks. Moltmann frequently quotes Bonhoeffer that only a suffering God can help (Moltmann 1991, 110). But a God necessarily subject to suffering is not really God in the Biblical sense and cannot bring hope for the final overcoming of suffering. A "genuine dialectic between God and the world that safeguards difference" (Johnson 1992, 226) between the two is required to under-gird the hope that Moltmann affirms. This means that although God must be understood as existing in certain ways on a continuum with creation, so that God can receive from it, still God's transcendence must be understood non-contrastively in qualitatively distinct terms, as Tanner argues, so that God is not limited by or dependent upon creation. God's ontological independence needs to be asserted so that God continues to be a source of radical hope and comfort, even while internally related to the world. By basing God's actions ad extra on the self-diffusive nature of God's love and God's openness to receive from creation, Edwards did this, and made a crucial contribution to Christian understandings of God's relationship to the world.

End Notes

1. This paper was originally given as the presidential address at the 2005 meeting of the Canadian Theological Society.

2. As Gilson (1965) notes, this gives Bonaventure's thought a very different orientation "from that of Aristotelian intellectualism". It also gives his trinitarian theology a markedly different accent from that of Thomas Aquinas. For a study of this difference, see Keane (1975).


4. For a brief discussion of how Bonaventure's understanding of the infinite could have been more nuanced, see Grant (2001, 239).

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