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# A Participatory God for a Participatory Culture: Christian Theological Perspectives on Networks

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## A PARTICIPATORY GOD FOR A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE: CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NETWORKS BY DWIGHT ZSCHEILE

The emerging twenty-first-century world of networks challenges many ways in which established congregations and denominations have structured their life, particularly around questions of authority, uniformity, and centralization. Yet understood historically and theologically, networks are neither new nor strange; they resonate deeply with Christian conceptions of God's triune community, the Spirit's empowerment of the people of God, and the development of the early church.

*Participation* has become a defining theme for how people today envision themselves and their world. Bureaucratic, centralized control, uniformity, hierarchy, and unidirectional processes of communication are giving way to networks characterized by higher levels of reciprocity, grassroots innovation, localized diversity, and co-creation linked by technology. Contemporary culture is being created dynamically by literally millions of local participants engaged simultaneously, often on their free time. Expectations around collaboration and participatory engagement have dramatically risen for emerging generations in the twenty-first century. Rather than residing in traditional hierarchies, authority is now being distributed across network participants. This can bring a sense of displacement to formal authorities accustomed to clear hierarchical roles and fixed structures.

Yet participation is a deep theme in Christian theology, beginning with the doctrine of the Trinity. If networks are social communities characterized by distributed, decentralized authority and high levels of mutuality and participation, there are striking parallels with the Christian doctrine of God. Recent decades have brought a renewed understanding of the Trinity as a social community, particularly as expressed in the ancient concept of *perichoresis*, the dynamic, mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Spirit in an open, circulating movement.<sup>1</sup> The Trinity is a community of reciprocity and interdependence, of mutual exchange and shared life that flows from one person to the other and spills beyond to create and sustain the life of the world. The Trinity presents us with an image of personhood grounded in relationality—an image with new resonance in a participatory culture.<sup>2</sup>

In the Incarnation of Jesus, God participates fully in human life so that humanity might participate in God's communal life. God moves into the neighborhood and makes God's home among us (John 1:14) in order to reconcile us to God and all things. Jesus shapes a community—the church—to be a sign, foretaste, and witness to the reconciliation of all humanity. That community is animated by the Spirit of God, who empowers, liberates, inspires, and reconciles disparate people into a new humanity in Christ. The Spirit is poured out “on all flesh” (Joel 2: Acts 2), enlivening and prophesying even and especially through those persons often marginalized in human society—women, the oppressed, the young, the old. The Pentecost vision is one of profound and inclusive participation and of dispersed authority.

Throughout the remainder of Acts, the Spirit surprises, provokes, leads, and instructs the church as the apostles are driven across cultural barriers. Innovation and change (for instance, the incorporation of Gentiles) tend to come not from the center (Jerusalem), but from the edges (Antioch), under the Spirit's guidance. It is Peter who must learn from Cornelius through the Spirit how the gospel reaches across cultures. As in a network, new insights and innovations often arise from the edges in the New Testament, not from centers of power.<sup>3</sup>

The early church began as a network of local congregations and house churches linked by personal relationships. In *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark traces how the gospel spread through social networks in the ancient world along the routes of the Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup> Churches were held together not by centralized organizational structures, standardized policies, or hierarchical lines of authority, but rather by bonds of fellowship, teaching, and support between leaders and members, including itinerant apostles. Paul's rhetoric in the Corinthian correspondence, for instance, demonstrates the character of this relational bond. His personal relationship with that community enabled him to challenge and rebuke them but precluded his exercising direct control over their life. While within several centuries the church eventually came to adopt Roman imperial forms of governance, which tended to concentrate power in hierarchical bishops overseeing discrete geographical areas, the church's roots lie in networks.

Networks are once again where we find ourselves today, holding promise for a new age of mission in today's world. Widespread, grass-roots innovation is required for the church to thrive today as many

established structures disintegrate. The gospel must be taken across cultural boundaries, and new forms of church must emerge that embody and proclaim God's promises afresh to new generations and populations. Networks foster exactly that kind of innovation; certainly the burgeoning Internet economy and culture are a case in point. While corporate bureaucracies stressed uniformity and standardization, networks encourage diversification and adaptation. A network age is an invitation to Christian leaders to trust the Spirit to guide local church members into creative and life-giving witness and service with their neighbors in a changing world.

## **THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN CONGREGATIONS: JEWISH PERSPECTIVES**

Computer scientists are tasked with developing ever-sophisticated ways of embedding digital technologies into our lives and communities. Rabbis and Jewish theologians are called to give theological voice to potential impacts of these technologies on what most essentially defines us as human beings. We have the advantage of drawing upon faith traditions that have grappled with these kinds of questions for millennia, and we know that historical upheavals, often propelled by technological changes, awaken these questions anew. We offer the following two essays as early contributions to a discussion on the implications of social networks, an increasingly dominant way of how individuals and communities come together now made possible by advances in digital technologies, on congregational communities.

## **DIVINELY BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE BY RABBI HAYIM HERRING**

Networks are the new form of organizational structure in the twenty-first century as people like Beth Kanter and Allison Fine elucidated in their book, *The Networked Nonprofit*.<sup>5</sup> (Actually, Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps predicted in 1994 in *The Age of the Network*<sup>6</sup> that networks would be the signature form of organizations in this century and I

al in the group as a unique person, affirm each person in their uniqueness, and help each person in a time of need. In community, individuals retain their unique individuality while opening themselves up to the care and teaching of others, while reaching outside themselves to touch the lives of their fellows.

The reciprocal dynamic at the heart of communal life—what has been espoused in Hayim Herring’s *Tomorrow’s Synagogue Today: Creating Vibrant Centers of Jewish Life* and now *Between Man and Man*<sup>11</sup>—is what Buber famously calls dialogue. In dialogue, I make myself available to another person and open myself up to that person. Buber calls the space created by a dialogical encounter “the between.” This is not a physical space that can be measured. As indicated in the passage above, the between is where God’s presence is realized in the world. The *shekhina*, the dwelling presence of God, dwells in social connectedness. Indeed, Buber believes that God dwells between every dialogical encounter a person has.

In the Torah, when Moses asks God for God’s name, God replies, “I will be what I will be.” Following a traditional Jewish interpretation, Buber understands this annunciation of God’s name to mean that God will always be there for us when we call out to God in our time of need. To live in God’s image, as individuals and as a community, means to imitate God’s “being there” by being there for each other when they call to us in their time of need. In these acts of love, caring, and dialogue, we let God’s presence enter the world and dwell in the spaces we call community.

## NOTES

1. Jürgen Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology,” in *Trinity, Community and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000).

2. See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) and John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

3. See Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 15–46.

4. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
5. Beth Kanter and Allison H. Fine, *The Networked Nonprofit: Connecting with Social Media to Drive Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), Kindle edition, 3.
6. Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps, *The Age of the Network: Organizing Principles for the 21st Century* (Essex Junction, VT: OMNEO, 1994).
7. Hayim Herring, "Network Judaism: A Fresh Look at the Organization of the American Jewish Community," in *Jewish Networking: Linking People, Institution, Community*, ed. Zachary I. Heller (Boston and Los Angeles: University of Judaism, 2001).
8. Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 18.
9. *Ibid.*, 29.
10. Martin Buber, *On Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1967).
11. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–45.