# JOINING THE ETERNAL CONVERSATION:
# John's Prologue & the Language of Worship

by Robert W. Jenson

To allay some possible misgivings, let me say at the beginning: This essay will not be concerned with the old gender-feminist assault on liturgical language. Substitution of modalist or simply pagan formulas for "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," playing about with syntactically impossible pronominal neologisms, the gabble of "God . . . God . . . God . . ." and all that like, have been refuted enough times and enough ways. And indeed, their refutation is almost trivial. Moreover, except in church bureaucracies and seminaries the constituency for gender-feminist tinkering with language is retiring or departing with its promoters. That is not to say that in large tracts of what may or may not still be Church, the damage has not already been done, or that more is not still to come. But there is little that can be done about that in articles or books; the bureaucrats don't read such things, and the various "theorists" in faculties only read each other.

But the uproar does perhaps serve one purpose: It draws our attention to the question of what sort of language is appropriate for Christian worship. It is a fundamental consideration of that question that I will attempt here.

## Eternal Utterance

I find the warrant and indeed an outline of such an attempt in the prologue of John's Gospel. There we learn, at the beginning of the whole tale, that the biblical God has eternally a word to say, a word that as God's eternal Word must conversely be God.

The text presents no indication that we are to take its use of "word," logos, in any attenuated sense. John does not say that God has and is something rather like a word, or that it is as if a word were God. John's proposition is about as straightforward as could be, and appears in a decidedly pedagogic if strophic diction. Moreover and decisively, John 1:1–3 is a piece of Christological biblical exegesis, of Genesis 1, where God calls the world forth by formulated utterance. If I may cite Martin Luther, "Moses uses the term amar, which straightforwardly means the spoken word. . . . By a mere word that he speaks God makes the heavens and the earth from nothing." And this, of course, tells us in turn how to read John's exegesis of Genesis: The word that is "in the divine being," says Luther, is "an uttered word by which something is . . . enjoined" (WA 42, 13:13–15). The Word that eternally is with God and so is God, is discourse, utterance.

We should not interpret logos in John 1 as if the evangelist were exegeting Socrates or Plotinus rather than the Priestly document. Reading logos in John 1 as "concept" has been a very creative misreading, going back to the Fathers themselves. We rightly marvel at the theologoumena that have resulted from it, and should indeed gladly appropriate them, for they have their own justification. But we should not allow that to

rob us of the yet more important teaching that the text itself proposes. It is not a concept that is eternally with God, according to John, it is God's utterance that is thus with him. And for our topic that is the decisive point.

The import of John's doctrine for worship may perhaps be evoked in a preliminary way by noting a particularly lamentable hymn, familiar—I am sure—to many of us. John Greenleaf Whittier wrote meltingly of "the silence of eternity," which is then interpreted for us by something called love. But in the triune God, the God of John's prologue, there is no such thing as the silence of eternity. What is eternal is not silence, but discourse. Ignatius of Antioch propounded the magnificent theologoumenon that the Word "breaks God's silence." Two centuries of reflection, on questions that perhaps never occurred to Ignatius, made it dogma: This does not mean that God in himself is silent and then happens to speak, but rather that precisely the breaking of silence is eternally constitutive of God's triune life.

This biblical and dogmatic notion of an intrinsically talkative God is, of course, an offense to usual religion. For by speech persons become involved with one another, they become mutually invested and historical, and it is precisely escape from mutual investment and history that human religiosity seeks in the various divinities it posits. The biblical God provides no such escape.

The triune God's very life is mutual investment; in the classical formulation, a triune identity simply is a subsisting relation to the other triune identities. And whether you are willing to speak of the divine identities' perichoresis as divine "history" or not is, I think, mostly a matter of conceptual taste. This God's salvation, the "deification" to which he draws us, is not a vanishing into the sea of abstract perfection but our total inclusion in the life of the three identities, and that is to say, given John's teaching, in their living discourse.

**Silence & Lyrics**

A first liturgical consequence: Christian worship is supposed to sanctify us, that is, to move us toward God; a single Liturgy or a liturgical year or a whole life in the Liturgy is intended to move us to ever more perfect inclusion in his life. And since the God in question is the inwardly talkative triune God, Christian Liturgy does not move toward silence. It is not, of course, that silence does not have an important place in Christian worship, but in worship of the triune God, silence occurs insofar as silence belongs to discourse, insofar as in any authentic conversation no participant talks all the time or without pausing to think. Thus, when, after one of us has read a lesson to the rest of us, a period of silence is enforced, this is not to render the mind simply blank, but to allow, at best, for the inspiration of the Spirit—who even when he employs the language of angels always makes sense—and at least for ruminating the text just heard—and that is the case even if such periods of silence occupy most of a religious life.

Nor should one take my stricture as a conventional attack on mysticism. But there are mysticisms and mysticisms, and when the church's magisterium has been up to its task,

it has been very precise in judging between them. There is the meditation that makes the soul a blank, and there is the meditation that chews on the sheer words of Scripture or of the Fathers or spiritual writers. If we think we perceive—or rather unperceive—an Urgrund in God, we are deluded unless this is identifiably the Grund of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereupon we are back with John.

So what follows practically? First and very directly, a negative. There are a variety of linguistic techniques by which language suppresses itself, commits a sort of semantic suicide. None of these can be appropriate for worship of the triune, talkative God.

So, for example, a word or phrase can be obsessively repeated, not to imprint it on the mind, but precisely to strip it of semantic force, to make it into a sort of absence where language used to be. I used to tell philosophy students that if they had never experienced the shock of sheer unidentified being, they might try taking any irrelevant word, perhaps pillow, and just saying it over and over and over and. . . . And there are religious disciplines in which such techniques occupy a large place. On the current Christian scene, it is not at all clear that the primitive vocabulary and incessant repetition characteristic of what are called "praise songs" and "choruses," or of the ditties randomly commissioned to pep up the more staid liturgical traditions, do not have this function. Quite obviously, most rock or rap lyrics are intended to destroy their own semantics—just as the instrumentalists trash their instruments. Just therefore lyrics in that style can have no place in worship of the triune God, though they may do very well for the undefined oceanic divinity of the "New Age" or of multicultural religion.

See how—if I may put it so—linguistic is the language of a classic prayer—how much it has to say and how mightily it strives to say it exactly: "Almighty and everlasting God, who of thy great mercy didst save Noah and his family in the ark from perishing by water; and also didst safely lead the children of Israel thy people through the Red Sea, figuring thereby thy Holy Baptism; and by the baptism of thy well-beloved Son Jesus Christ, in the river Jordan, didst sanctify Water to the mystical washing away of sin; we beseech thee, for thine infinite mercies, that thou wilt mercifully look upon. . . ."

**Divine Conversation**

A second consideration deriving from John's very first verses, read as they should primarily be read, comprises both a negation and a positive mandate. Trinitarian doctrine of God apprehends God and then God again; it apprehends an other in whom and as whom God knows himself. And this other, as I have just argued, is not in the first instance an essence; God does not know himself by seeing himself in a sort of metaphysical mirror. This other, according to John, is rather an utterance. God speaks himself, and so, in what he says, knows himself. And, according to John, he speaks himself not only to himself but also to us. Or rather, John's point is the vice versa: The word we hear from God—the story John is about to tell about Christ and the words of Christ he will report—this word is none other than the Word in the beginning, the Word by which God knows himself.

Thus, we never start from scratch in speaking to or of God. Our situation is not that we glimpse God or sense him or intuit him or whatever, and then devise language to respond to or tell of what we have glimpsed. God addresses us, and we respond to what he has said; then we turn to others also, to involve them in the conversation.

In any successful conversation, diction and vocabulary and rhetoric are determined by the initial intervention that starts the conversation. So in our conversation with, and only so, about God, the diction and vocabulary and rhetoric must be appropriate to the divine intervention that begins this converse.

That is, the language of Christian worship is not devised by us to project upon the infinite our religious hopes and desires. Whatever may be true of other religions—which are perfectly able to speak for themselves in this matter—Christianity cannot accept the analysis of our address to or for God as metaphorical projection, whether in Feuerbach's original and sophisticated version or in the bowdlerized versions currently promoted.

This cuts out huge tracts of worship-language being concocted in worship committees, national bureaucracies, and publishing companies, that are devised on pop-Feuerbachian assumptions. "What do we want to say?" is often the first question. And the second is, "What appealing pictures can we find to say it?" These are wrong, indeed unbelieving questions.

Rather, the language of Christian worship must be stylistically and rhetorically appropriate within the conversation to which it belongs, a conversation we do not initiate. If you meet me on the street and politely say "Good morning," it jars if I respond, "Cool, man." And, of course, vice versa: If you say, "Did you dig that sunrise?" it will jar if I respond, "The ochres were especially exquisite"—unless, of course, our conversational project is understood to involve precisely the construction of such linguistic ironies, a project that must itself have been launched by a specific sort of address.

This requirement is much easier to instance negatively than affirmatively, since its fulfillment does not call attention to itself.

**The Word Is God**

And then a third consideration: The word that God addresses to us is the same word he speaks to know himself. Let us take John's notion of God's Logos in the expansive way the tradition has done: to embrace Christ and what he says and the gospel about him and the Scripture that testifies to both. Then what we have to acknowledge is that we cannot get behind all this to some linguistically blank table of deity, on which to inscribe our metaphors. For there is no such thing back there. With the triune God, what we hear is what we get, because that's what there is; the Word is the complete and perfect self-statement of God, he is God.

I, of course, do not mean that we are bound to use biblical concepts only or, what is much the same, to formulate only propositions found in the Bible or strictly derivable from it. For the words of the gospel and the biblical text witness to something beyond their immediate selves: They witness to the reality of God in the history of Israel and in the death and resurrection of Christ, and it must therefore be possible to say the same as the Bible in an other-than-biblical vocabulary and rhetoric. Yet the reluctance of the church fathers to work with non-biblical language, and the great caution with which, when they absolutely had to, they introduced language at home in other religions or in the great Greek thinkers, had its powerful reasons and remains exemplary. For although all actual discourse in the Church is indeed in one way or another witness to something beyond its immediate self, two points must be observed.

First, that other is itself word, the Word that God is and speaks to us. The contention of post-structuralists that there is no escape from language, no reference to something "different" that does not in turn "defer" the reference, is right, but not in the nihilistic way they think it is: The Word of God that lives in the Church is historically actual as Israel and Jesus, and is itself the one Other by reference to which discourse is finally rescued from free fall.

And so, second, we have no access to the object of our witness other than the discourse to which our witness belongs. So our talk for and to and about God is always converse with the initiating texts and bound to recur to their language. Evangelicals who speak of the "inscripturation" of the Word have a real point.

It is, in fact, a point closely related to a major contention of Thomas Aquinas. According to Thomas, the axioms and warrants of sacra doctrina are located in a prior discourse, to which we, however, have no direct access. The axioms and warrants of our discourse about God are located in the knowledge that God has of himself and that he shares with his saints. We are privileged to overhear this sharing, but—if I may put it so—we are not native speakers of the language we overhear. As such, what we are least able to do in this discourse is translate. Sometimes we have to, but only when we are driven to it and then only with great reserve.

Let me put the practical point: Proper liturgical language arises in a context dominated by the reading and meditating and interpreting of Scripture, so as to form with Scripture a whole that is as semantically and rhetorically seamless as possible. Language that does not arise in this context cannot be suitable to the triune God.

This is from the same baptismal rite earlier excerpted: "Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin; and that our Savior Christ saith, None can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of Water and of the Holy Ghost; I beseech you to call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy he will grant to this child that thing which by nature he cannot have; that he may be . . . received into Christ's holy Church and be made a lively member of the same." There is just one bit here not directly taken from Scripture, the phrase "by nature." The point is that in this context also this phrase could just as well

have been taken from Scripture, that no one who had not studied a bit of theological history could be sure.

**The Incarnate Story**

It is time to move to the second of the Johannine prologue's great affirmations. This Word became flesh; the Word is now the human reality that is narrated in the Gospel narrative introduced by the prologue. We have beheld "his" glory, not the glory of abstract divinity.

Which is to say, the matter of God's discourse with us and so of our discourse with him and each other, is a narrative. For persons, of course, are who and what they are only in and as the plotted sequence of their lives. We talk appropriately about persons as we tell their stories, or, in the second and first persons, enter into their stories. We talk appropriately to or for or about God as we tell of Jesus' life and crucifixion and resurrection, as we tell this man's story, a story that pre-exists in the story told by the Old Testament, of Abraham and Exodus and Exile, and post-exists in the story of the Church and its coming consummation. In the first and second person, we talk appropriately insofar as our prayers and praises hook into this story, to be themselves events in the story we have to tell.

Now there are forms of discourse appropriate to telling a story and forms of discourse inappropriate thereto. Let me choose as a first instance of inappropriate form, one currently much beloved: other stories. It is, as soon as you think about it, a curious proceeding that is so often recommended. From the indubitable observation that stories communicate powerfully, it is argued that we need to find or make up stories to make the biblical message live. But the biblical message already is a story, and includes many wonderful substories, many small subplots; and you cannot "illustrate" or explain one story with another. A hymn or prayer or sermon that carries on about my interesting story only distracts from the matter at hand, unless my story is indeed one of those subplots and is told as such. Jesus' parables "illustrated" nothing at all. They are themselves invitations into the history of the Kingdom.

To see how it should work, consider the way the great Western collects work: Typically, the address to God is first a name or title, followed by a narrative identification of this God, e.g., "Almighty God, who through thine only begotten Son hast overcome death. . . ." The item of biblical, and usually directly Christological, narrative used is chosen to open a gate for the petition that follows, as the identification just quoted opens to the petition for life in the living Christ.

There are, of course, other inappropriate forms. Let me note just one more: abstraction that leads from rather than to the narrative. It used to be observed that all Lutheran sermons were the same one—the disintegration of the Lutheran preaching tradition has, of course, reduced the scope of this particular critique. What the preacher had to say was that "we are justified by faith apart from works of the law"; and the text functioned as an illustration of this truth, never mind what text it was. And there are Lutheran

hymns and prayers that do the same thing. More recently, "God is love" and variations on the theme of "God's grace is everywhere" and so forth are popular.

What sort of language is appropriate? Consider the Our Father. With the opening address, we claim a place in the story between Israel and Jesus and the one they called Father. Then we invoke the conclusion of God's history with us. Just so, we qualify our life now as "daily," and as characterized by needs, sins, and fears of the future, and discuss these matters with God. Or, for the supreme example, consider any of the great anaphoras of the Eucharist.

**Seeing the Word**

And now I must move to another kind of matter, counter to the thrust of this essay so far. The Gospel of John is, of course, full of hearing the Word that Christ is, and hearing and speaking are my assignment. But here in the prologue we read that the witnesses have somehow seen the Word, and indeed seen it in glory, in the beauty that manifests God. Our discourse to or for God is somehow to be visible.

The chapel of St. John's Abbey is a landmark in the history of art, but I do wonder about its bareness, and even more about the bareness of many second-rank manifestations of the same aesthetic. I think, when we talk with God, we should want an icon or two about us, one big mosaic at least, or a great crucifix or medallion over the altar. Architecture or iconography proper are not my assignment. But it is my assignment to note how the Word that became flesh is a Word that is seen when it is heard. This is not, of course, in itself a mysterious point. You are seeing me speak right now, and your hearing me would be ontologically transformed were I suddenly to vanish from your sight.

The mandate about language may perhaps be put so: The proper language of Christological worship is "iconic," that is, it is of a sort that asks to be accompanied by depiction. The one whose story it tells and whose discourse it continues is visible and so—as the Seventh Ecumenical Council reasonably concluded—depictable. When composing or choosing a prayer, this could be a test: Try praying it in the presence of a crucifix, or a Madonna of the Sign. Do the words make you uncomfortable with the icon or vice versa? St. John's is Roman Catholic turf, of course, and there was a time when, for Roman Catholics, that suggestion would have been redundant; I am not sure that it is now.

Language that is "iconic" in this sense is supple and allusive: Bending this way or that, and pointing beyond itself, it opens to continuation by other symbolic means. A model that comes preeminently to my mind is Isaiah's Songs of the Servant. To whom exactly does "my servant" refer? Who is the Servant? It is not that the poems are unclear or ambiguous; they are models of precision. But the Servant may be Israel as prophet to the nations, or an individual prophet to Israel—who may be the songs' prophetic singer himself—or indeed the eschatological prophet whom Christians have always perceived in him.

So here is a sample of good stuff: ". . . and hast assured us in these holy mysteries that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son. . . ." The prayer has "mysteries" instead of "Lord's Supper" or "Sacrament," and does not much specify "body." Just so, this prayer asks to be said exactly where it is said, in the space where we have seen one reality of the Son's Body, on the altar, and are now seeing the other as we look around at one another, and it demands also that this space represent the mystical body, with saints around us and the Head of the body at the head of the space.

There is language that does not work that way, that does not solicit embodiment. To continue to beat up on my own confession, how would you make an icon for "We are justified by faith"? There is nothing wrong with this sentence as dogma—indeed everything right—but it does not work as Liturgy, or even in liturgical preaching.

To be "iconic," language must be familiar. Worshippers must not have to attend directly to its grammar in order to understand it. They must be able to handle it easily, so as simultaneously to intend motions or pictures or architecture. To the precise extent that worshippers cannot manage the language without book or bulletin in front of them, they cannot see the body of that language, they cannot do what John says disciples do.

**The Church's Language**

That the language of worship should be familiar does not mean that the language of worship should be "contemporary" as the word is usually used; if anything, it makes the opposite suggestion. The demand for "contemporary" language is almost always a demand for language that is familiar in some other linguistic community than the Church: the seventh grade or the talk shows or the boardroom or wherever. But the Church has her own culture, as she has her own polity. And therefore the Church inevitably is her own linguistic community also, however hard we may, in misguided moments, fight against this. We can banish Latin or Jacobean English if we insist, but something else will quickly replace it as the special church-language; and at that juncture we had better be alert to considerations of the sort I have been adducing, lest we replace the good with the mediocre or worse.

It is in the Church that the language of worship should be the familiar language. Even when the Church worships in what is called a "vernacular," the difference between what is said and enacted inside and outside the Church will create divergent dictions and rhetorics; perhaps most often the church's language will be marked by what others will call archaisms.

Such language is often decried for "excluding" various groups. People may say, "Well, I love the church's language, but we have to think about the young." There appears, however, to be no evidence at all that linguistic peculiarities put off the young or result in misunderstandings that would not have occurred anyway; on the contrary, precisely the young are wondrously adept at quickly grasping the diction of a different community and at shifting from the diction of one community to that of another. Driving back, many years ago, from a service at the National Cathedral, that had on that occasion been

Jacobean indeed, we had our 11-year-old daughter and her 11-year-old boy best friend in the back seat. We heard them telling each other how much they had preferred the service to those in their home congregations. It was, they said, "so timeless." New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine has the Shema in Hebrew as a familiar part of its service; the marvelously multi-class and multi-ethnic congregation shouts it out with joy. And I note no class or gender or ethnic or age imbalances in the ecumenical lay phalanx against new translations of the Our Father.

I need to remind you of the reason for these last reactionary remarks. The language of worship must be familiar for a reason: so that it can be iconic.

**The Word Sung**

And now a last and longest step. Several times I have sneaked up on the notion that our worshipping discourse not only depends upon the discourse that God is, but also participates in it. Perhaps the step is not taken in John's prologue, but the prologue urges us to it. And indeed the step is simply into the Gospel itself. The Word that is both with God and is God must just so be a conversation. It is this Word that the following Gospel will bring, and there we find the incarnate Logos in constant converse at once with the Father and with the disciples.

But perhaps this insight is more easily gained from the simpler style of the Synoptics. Jesus' disciples asked him how to pray. And he, notorious for praying to "My Father," thereby making himself out to be the Son, and indeed thereby eventually incurring his condemnation, invited them to pray with him. Pray so, he said, "Our Father. . . ." Christian prayer, and that in its broadest acceptation, is not prayer somehow to God in general; it is prayer with God the Son to God the Father.

And that means its language must be suitable to the triune discourse. We cannot, of course, make it suitable, or even know what it would be to do that. But we can perhaps recognize linguistic gifts that we may with justification think result from such sanctification. I have time to evoke only what seems to me the greatest.

By what categories may we evoke the triune life?

In the closing pages of volume one of my systematic theology, there is a sort of crescendo of "God is . . ." sentences and their justification. In all these, "God" indexes the perichoresis of the divine persons, the actual divine life that, according to Gregory of Nyssa, is the primary referent of the noun. All seek analogically to invoke that life, with due respect to the infinity that, again according to the Cappadocians, distinguishes divine identities and their divine life from created analogues. God, I say in crescendo, is event, person, decision, and discourse. All that is the sort of thing with which I began also here. But there is one more step.

If we think of the notion of infinite discourse as rigorously as our analogy-bound minds can manage, we come, I proposed in the last paragraph of that volume, to the notion of

music, and since this is triune music, of fugue. "God," I said as the last sentence of the book, "is a great fugue." Jonathan Edwards stated the converse insight: "When I try to form the idea of a perfectly happy society, I think of them singing sweetly together."

If this is insight, it provides also a last insight about liturgical language: It should always be singable. It should be easy to set to music. Recently, in a lection for prayers where I work was the famous passage from the Revelation: "Blessing and honor, glory and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb." It is not just that no middle-cultured Western mind can separate this passage from Handel's setting; if Handel hadn't captured our memories, somebody else's setting would have. This doxology is perfect liturgical language, which should not surprise us, since it is an overheard bit of the Liturgy of the Kingdom. When tempted to commit a liturgical text, see if you can make a chant-tune to go with it, any kind of chant-tune—country, Gregorian, twelve-tone.

**Worship & Culture**

I can perhaps sum up all I have said in an exhortation. Worship is what the Church does as a community. If a community has any life in it at all, that life is a culture—note how we even speak of a corporation's unique "corporate culture." And a culture is most immediate in its language. Let me adduce a parallel to the present crisis in the language of worship.

It is by now a common observation: The Protestant churches were once the established religion of this nation, acknowledged or not. Their establishment was above all ethical: They set the moral agenda of the society. Since the Civil War, the Constantinian settlement has been breaking up even in this nation "with the soul of a church." And the American Protestant churches have taken a desperately wrong tack: They have tried to hold their social position by secularizing themselves. If the society would not let the churches set its moral agenda, they would ask the society to set theirs. The disaster of this tactic is now plain, and there are feeble efforts to begin to change course.

We should not now repeat the mistake with the language of our worship. The chief thing we must do to avoid it is remember which God we want to worship.

Robert W. Jenson is senior scholar for research at the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton. He is associate director of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology (CCET) and co-editor of its journal Pro Ecclesia. He is the author of numerous essays and books, including Systematic Theology, Unbaptized God, Story and Promise, The Triune Identity, and America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards.
This article is taken from a lecture to CCET's summer 2000 conference, The Crisis of Christian Worship, held at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, and is used by permission.

Source: http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=14-09-032-f