

Robert W. Jenson, 1930 - 2017

His theology was done with "the profundity and inventive élan that belong to only the very great thinkers." This description of Jonathan Edwards in a book entitled *America's Theologian* might well be applied to its author, Robert Jenson. Widely recognized in his lifetime as among the finest systematic theologians, this son of Norwegian Lutherans saw it as the theologian's universal calling to provide the same "critique in the service of the gospel" that he found in Edwards. This he did with his own profundity and inventive élan: from the days when he and his beloved wife Blanche kept what they called their protest clothes hanging in their Gettysburg hallway, ready for the next march, to his later writings on culture, where he offered the same "adumbration of universal *harmony* as encompassed in *triune* harmony," that he so admired in Edwards. Above all, Robert Jenson was a very great thinker who brought the generative power of his brilliant mind and inimitable prose style to the humble exposition of the mystery of the triune God, as made known in Holy Scripture, the Great Tradition, and the Church's life and liturgy. As he said in a characteristically terse remark to a visitor, who had asked Jenson how to motivate students to study theology - tell them, "God *is*."

Jenson began his own studies in theology at Luther Seminary in 1951 after doing classics and philosophy at Luther College. His later doctoral work at Heidelberg University on Barth's doctrine of election was completed in Basel with Barth's blessing and published as *Alpha and Omega* in 1963. These years were enriched by conversations with Wolfhart Pannenberg, not least on Hegel, and by the start of a lifelong friendship and collaboration with fellow Lutheran Carl Braaten.

After returning home to teach at Luther College, he went on to serve as tutor in Lutheran studies at Mansfield College, Oxford University. There he supervised Colin Gunton, one of many talented young theologians he was to inspire over his lifetime, and worked on *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For*, and *God After God*, books that showed him to be an important American voice in the new theological debates on hope with Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann.

While he loved to recall being known as "the Lutheran" at Oxford University, he returned to the United States in 1968 to teach at the Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, where his dedication to his students for ministry, both women and men, was matched by original scholarship on Lutheran and Patristic themes, expressed in books like *Visible Words* and *The Triune Identity*. It was in this period that his ecumenical interests and participation in multilateral conversations gathered momentum, collaborating with George Lindbeck in the Roman Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue, and engaging with Catholic and Orthodox theologians like Ratzinger, von Balthasar, and Zizioulas. His ecumenical commitment would perhaps find its fullest expression in *The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*, published in a volume with Carl Braaten, *One Body Through the Cross*, in 2003.

Following two decades at Gettysburg, he moved to St Olaf's College in Minnesota in 1988, where he taught in the religion department, founded the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology and journal *Pro Ecclesia* with Carl Braaten, and completed his major work, the

Systematic Theology. These two volumes place him among the great theologians, as a daring thinker on God and time. In 1998, he retired and moved to the Center of Theological Inquiry at Wallace Alston's invitation to serve as its Senior Scholar for Research. There he convened the Center's conversations with authority and distinction until his retirement with Alston in 2005. At my invitation, he returned as a Member to work on his theological commentary on Ezekiel.

His last years were spent happily and fruitfully in Princeton. Among the writings that continued to flow from his hand were conversations on God with his granddaughter, and lectures on theology to a Princeton University class, edited as ever by his beloved Blanche with her own theological acuity. To the end, there was a steady stream of friends and students to their home, blessed by the generosity of Jens' scholarship and the warmth of Blanche's hospitality.

The American Theological Society remembers one of its own, a great American theologian in the lineage of Jonathan Edwards, but above all, an earnest seeker after evangelical and catholic truth. When you sat with Jens in a seminar, there were two verbal ticks that gave the clue to his opinion. If he said to you, "Now look ...," you knew you were beyond all hope. But if he said, "Now see ...," then there was some hope for your enlightenment!

We all *look* through a glass darkly in this life, none more faithfully and fearlessly than Robert W. Jenson. But now he *sees* the God who *is*.

Thanks be to God.

William Storrar