



# Reader in Trinitarian Theology

Henco van der Westhuizen (Editor)







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# Acknowledgments

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- 'God in Systematic Theology after Barth: Trends and perspectives' by Rian Venter was published in 2018 in *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4(2):303–333. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a15>
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- 'The Trinity in the Confession of Belhar (1982)' by Piet Naudé was first published in 2004 as 'Confessing the one faith: Theological resonance between the Creed of Nicea (325 AD) and the Confession of Belhar (1982 AD) in *Scriptura* 85:35–53. <https://doi.org/10.7833/85-0-935>

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- In 2019, Daniel J. Louw's 'The Triune God and hospitality' was published in *HTS Theological Studies*, 75(1):<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5347> as 'The *Infiniscience* of the hospitable God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: Re-interpreting Trinity in the light of the Rublev icon'.

# Introduction

This volume is dedicated to Rian Venter. It is the first of three volumes on *Doing Theology in South Africa*.

As part of this project, academic articles on the following theological themes in South African theology are being published in the *Journal of Systematic Theology* ([www.journalofsystematictheology.com](http://www.journalofsystematictheology.com)): The biblical traditions and theology, hermeneutics, creation, hamartiology, soteriology, eschatology, baptism and holy communion, but also confessional theology, philosophical theology, African theology, liberation theology, black theology, political theology, feminist theology, womanist theology, queer theology, disability theology, ecotheology, and theology and science.

In the tradition of *Doing Theology in Context: South African perspectives* (1994) and *Doing Ethics in Context: South African perspectives* (1994) edited by John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, the *Journal of Systematic Theology* has published and publishes academic articles that will allow all those interested in South African theology to be introduced to its being done.

Although the *JST* will also publish academic articles on *Doing Christology in South Africa* (by Dirk J. Smit) and *Doing Pneumatology in South Africa* (by Henco van der Westhuizen), and although an academic article on *Doing Trinitarian Theology in South Africa* (by Rian Venter) has been published (<https://journalofsystematictheology.com/trinity/>. Accessed 15 November 2022), the publishing of the first of three volumes on doing theology in South Africa highlights the importance of *Theology* in the past and also for the future of theology in South Africa.

Rian Venter has always had an interest in *Theology*, particularly, an interest in the *state of scholarship* on God. The volume is therefore not only dedicated to him, but also introduced and concluded by academic articles on the Trinity by him.

In a way, this state of scholarship that so interests him has to do with the importance of –theologically – being surrounded by a cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1).

To witness is to see.

In this sense, this volume wants those who have been doing and wants to do theology in South Africa to have a sense of those who wanted to see in the past, asking how the way they saw framed the present and

will frame the future of theology. It allows those doing theology today to be spectators, to look through the frames of the present to the past.

To witness with such a cloud of witnesses and their different pasts in the present is to witness in time, to differentiate *temporalities*.

To witness is to witness in place and so to be *emplaced*.

To witness is therefore always at least to witness as a body amidst bodies. Witnessing is always *embodied* witnessing. It is embodying.

To be a witness and to witness is, therefore, in a way, to authenticate. And in *this* way, it is also to *be* a witness and to witness *against*.

This is what this volume wants to do. This is what this *Reader in Trinitarian Theology* wants to be to future readers: to re-plot, to re-emplace, to re-embodify *doing* theology in South Africa.

But it also wants to be a cloud *for witnesses*.

The cloud for witnesses is *God on their way*. ‘During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud’ (Exodus 14:24). This cloud is therefore a way of witnessing God *through* theologians, *as* theologians, *for* theologians doing theology in South Africa today.

The cloud for witnesses wants in this way *to guide them on their way*. ‘By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people’ (Exodus 13:21–22). This cloud wants to guide theologians today on their ways – also when it is being guided against the witnesses of the past or in tension with them.

After almost two decades at Justo Mwale Theological College in Lusaka (Zambia), and a decade-and-a-half at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein (South Africa), Professor Rian Venter retires at the end of the year of publication of this book. Appointed in 2006 in Systematic Theology, Venter served as Head of the Department (HOD) and also as acting Dean.

At Justo Mwale and later at the University of the Free State he published on theology and context (Venter, 2022a, 2022b, 2021a, 2021b,

2016a, 2012b, 2005)<sup>1</sup> and on doing theology within a University context (Venter 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2015c, 1999, 2011).<sup>2</sup>

He published on: Eschatology: (2015d, 2012e);<sup>3</sup> Pneumatology (2012f);<sup>4</sup> and Christology (2017, 1995, 1989, 1984),<sup>5</sup> the theme he delved into in detail in his doctorate (with *Doktorvater* Johan Heyns, in 1989).<sup>6</sup>

For many years, however, Venter's main research focus has been on Trinitarian Theology, the theme of this volume. It is on this theme that he gave his valedictory lecture, the theme that was also the focus of his inaugural lecture in 2010 when he became a Full Professor.<sup>7</sup>

His Theology of the Trinity has been published as *Supplementum 34 of Acta Theologica: Considering the doctrine of God: Fragments on Trinity, discourses, and time* (2022).

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1 The titles of Venter's articles (also in the footnotes that follow) are: 'Divine hiddenness, the melancholic self, and a pandemic spirituality' (2022a); 'Pandemic, theological sense-making and the Triune God' (2022b); 'Theology, philosophy of biology and virology: An interdisciplinary conversation in the time of COVID-19' (2021a); (with Francois Tolmie) 'Making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic from the Bible – Some perspectives' (2021b); 'Teologie en konteks: Vraag na 'n teologie vir Suid-Afrika' (2016a); 'Theology, the post-apartheid university and epistemological transformation: Intimating the shape of the challenge' (2012b); 'The post-modern condition, leadership and trinitarian echoes: 16 theses' (2005).

2 'Theology and the (post-)apartheid university: Mapping discourses, interrogating transformation' (2016c); 'Mapping the (post) apartheid condition: Interrogating theological disciplines' (2016e); 'Transformation, theology and the public university in South Africa' (2015c); 'Doing Systematic Theology in the post-apartheid condition' (2012a); 'Justo Mwale Theological College: A story of theological education in Zambia towards the third millennium' (1999).

3 'Trends in contemporary Christian eschatological reflection' (2015d); 'It shone with the glory of the Lord: On Beauty and Christian *Telos*' (2012e).

4 'The agency of the Holy Spirit and heuristic categories for discernment in spirituality' (2012f).

5 'The plurality of contemporary Christological discourses: Some perspectives' (2017); 'Historical Jesus research and systematic theology: From alienation to a common vision' (1995); 'Die *Theologia Crucis* as Leitmotiv in Luther se Teologie' (1984).

6 'Opstanding & bevryding: Die opstanding as struktureel-ontsluitende paradigma vir 'n bevrydingsoteriologie' (Unpublished D.D., University of Pretoria, 1989).

7 'Speaking God today: The adventures of a rediscovered trinitarian grammar' is available at <https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11660/630/VenterR.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (Accessed 15 November 2022), but also as chapter 31 of this volume.

Throughout his career, however, he has published on God the Trinity (2019, 2018b, 2013a, 2012c, 2011, 2010a, 2009, 2007, 2004a),<sup>8</sup> on the state of scholarship on the Trinity (2019b, 2018c, 2016b),<sup>9</sup> on scholars on the Trinity (2019a, 2018a, 2018d, 2010b, 2008c).<sup>10</sup> He also published on themes related to the Trinity, on themes from a trinitarian perspective.<sup>11</sup>

For *this*, this first volume is dedicated to Rian Venter, *a witness to the cloud in the day and a fire in the night*.

Henco van der Westhuizen  
Bloemfontein

- 
- 8 'Re-imagining God in an era of contingency' (2019); 'Thinking God in a global multi-religious context: trends, challenges and possibilities' (2018b); 'Speaking God at a public university in South Africa: The challenge of epistemological transformation' (2013a); 'Thinking about God today: Eavesdropping on some discourses' (2012c). 'Doing trinitarian theology: Primary references to God and imagination' (2010a); 'God after Darwin: The promise of trinitarian theology' (2009); 'Roeping en opleiding in 'n spesifieke konteks: Vyf trinitariese stellings oor motivering en oriëntasie' (2007); 'Trinitariese verbeelding en post-apartheid Suider-Afrika: Fragmente oor dogmatisering en dosering' (2004a).
- 9 'Taking stock of the Trinitarian renaissance: What have we learnt?' (2019b); 'God in Systematic Theology after Barth: Trends and perspectives' (2018c) *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4(2):303–333. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a15>; 'The Triune God in South African Systematic Theology since 1976' (2016b).
- 10 'Reflections on Schleiermacher's God' (2019a); 'Engaging Klaus Nürnberger's interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity' (2018a); 'Trinitarian theology and Richard Kearney's atheism: An engagement' (2018d); 'Trinity and beauty: The theological contribution of Jonathan Edwards' (2010); 'Trinity and Africa: The contribution of Charles Nyamiti' (2008).
- 11 'Hoop in 'n tyd van sinisme: 'n Trinitariese perspektief' (2013b); 'A Trinitarian approach to spirituality: Exploring the possibilities' (2015a); 'Space, trinity and city: An exploration' (2006); 'To love God, the poor and learning': towards an ethic of theological knowledge' (2012g); 'Triniteit en etiek: Van 'n relasionele God tot 'n etiek van die Ander' (2012d); 'God images, ethical effects and the responsibility of Systematic Theology' (2008a); 'Trinity and mission: Challenges to a reformed witness in Africa today' (2004b); 'Onderweg na 'n teologie van interkulturaliteit: 'n Trinitariese perspektief' (2008b).



# The Triune God in South African Systematic Theology Since 1976

Rian Venter

## 1. Brief motivation: Focus on God-symbol

The dialectic between *relevance and identity* has been a methodological key in my theology since I worked on a doctoral thesis in the mid-eighties. Originally I thought about resurrection and liberation, and gradually I expanded this to a focus on Trinitarian theology within the (post) apartheid condition, and wrote, merely for myself, a programmatic essay in 2004 on this. My intuition has always been that I should take apartheid seriously, not merely as a social ethical question, but also as an epistemic *topos*. At the same time, the question about God has intrigued me from early on, realising that the identity of faith and theology stands and falls here. The so-called ‘return of God in contemporary theology’ (Tracy 1994) and the emergence of the Trinitarian Renaissance naturally appealed to me, and I situated my own thinking and research along these parameters. The recognition of ‘something’,<sup>1</sup> whether we name it God, or the divine, or the Sacred, or the Ultimate, or the Transcendent, remains of absolute importance. That symbol is a final orientation to make sense of reality, and by saying this I do not deny others their right to advance a radical immanent understanding of life. For the Christian faith, the Trinitarian symbol is the central reference, and from this Mystery, we should construct the cognitive content of the faith and its relevance to society at large. *How* that confession has academically and socially functioned in South African Systematic Theology is my interest in this submission.

## 2. The previous generation of systematic theologians

Unfortunately, nobody has undertaken a full and detailed history of Systematic Theology in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Such a task would not only be helpful but would at the same time be most daunting to complete. It would require a focus on theologians, institutions, societies, journals and

1 See for a discussion of the apt Dutch term ‘*ietsisme*’ – Sarot (2014).

2 See Strauss (1995) for research with a limited focus.

post-graduate research, but also interpretative categories, in order to understand the various operating paradigms. One insight will undeniably transpire: the dominance of the Reformed tradition, which could be easily explained historically. Major systematic theologians, obviously with a few exceptions, were largely from this tradition. My own narrative will mostly follow this path, although I am aware of remarkable systematic theologians from other traditions.

The seventies and eighties in South Africa were, in terms of Systematic Theology, dominated by figures such as J.A. Heyns, W.D. Jonker, A. König and J.J.F. Durand. It was in a sense the exciting heyday of this discipline and the era of the influence of textbooks. To find in Afrikaans for the first-time work of high quality, with an ambitious and totalising scope, was quite an experience. The series *Wegwysers in die Dogmatiek* was introduced by Durand with his work on God – *Die lewende God* (1976). Two years later Heyns published a full and comprehensive dogmatics, *Dogmatiek* (1976), which became an immensely influential reference book for ministers. König started a series of monographs on God, eschatology and Christology, the doctrine of creation and eventually the anthropology, which was introduced by his *Hier is ek!* (1975).

In this purview, one cannot describe the position of specifically Heyns, Durand and König, who wrote explicitly on God. But a number of perspectives can be raised. These theologians all worked in a typical Western tradition, deeply influenced by Dutch theology and, to some minor extent, German theology. They would all have considered themselves as Trinitarian theologians. Retrospectively, a number of commonalities can be identified: first, the critical shift advocated by Barth, whose work preceded all their publications, that the Trinity should be the *fundamental optic* for theology, has not been internalised by them. Second, very little, if any trace at all, of *social Trinitarianism*, is present in their work. Third, there is no openness to the reality of *Africa* and its conception of the divine. Finally, their positions on apartheid, which differed, were not informed fundamentally by their Trinitarian faith, but by other considerations and other forms of theological rhetoric. Dogmatics remains in their work, of which the academic quality should in no way be questioned, sanitised from the travails of history and its conflicts.

### 3. Excuse: The Trinitarian Renaissance

It may be interesting to correlate the South African work with the international Trinitarian Renaissance. The works by Barth, his *Church Dogmatics* Volume I/1 (original 1936) and by Rahner, his essay in *Mysterium Salutis* Volume 2 (original 1967), are widely considered the

impetus for the new twentieth-century interest. The actual narrative may go much further back, even two centuries, and especially to Hegel (see Sanders 2012:22–24).<sup>3</sup> Barth established an intimate relationship between revelation as his point of departure and the Trinity, and by placing a discussion of this doctrine right at the beginning of dogmatics he cemented it as the determining hermeneutical optic for all the subsequent discussion. The foundation was laid for a consistent Trinitarian vision of the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> Rahner called attention to the dismal position of the Trinity in actual church life and formulated what has become known as the Rahner rule: ‘The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity, and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity’ (Rahner 1997:22). The far-reaching ontological and epistemological implications of this affirmation are still being explored by scholars. It does not seem that these early developments have decisively influenced the previous generation of South African systematicians.

The Trinitarian Renaissance and its emphases have been well described and only a few features can be highlighted. Central in this shift is obviously a new enthusiasm and appreciation of the doctrine. More substantial are the prominence of the immanent/economic distinction and its significance, the turn to *relationality* to identify the nature of God, and the insistence on the ‘practical implications’ of the doctrine (see Kärkkäinen 2009 and Schwöbel 2014 for excellent overviews). A book like *The Oxford handbook to the Trinity* (Emery & Levering 2011b) conveys an impression of how comprehensive and far-reaching the recovery actually has been. Seminal early works were published by Boff (1988), Jenson (1982), Jüngel (1976), LaCugna (1991) and Moltmann (1981),<sup>5</sup> to mention only a few. The turn to the Trinity obviously generated much controversy.<sup>6</sup> Ways clearly part on interpretations of patristic theologians such as the Cappadocians and Augustine on the notion of a ‘social Trinity’, on reinterpretations of

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3 Sanders (2012:23) in an interesting treatment of the history of the Trinity emphasises that a rather ‘Romantic doctrine of the Trinity ... made its way into the modern age’. Reinterpretation took place in light of central Romantic ideas: world history, human experience and the retrieval of the past. He correlates motifs and concerns of Trinitarian scholars such as Moltmann, Pannenberg, LaCugna and Johnson with these ideas.

4 See Habets & Tolliday (2011) for a detailed discussion of various aspects of Barth’s Trinitarian views.

5 Dates of translations.

6 For only one example, see the work of the vocal critic Stephen Holmes (2012). His basic thesis is summarised in the following words (:2) – ‘I see the twentieth century renewal of Trinitarian theology as depending in large part on concepts and ideas that cannot be found in patristic, mediaeval, or Reformation accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity.’

divine attributes such as immutability and simplicity, and on the precise function of the doctrine. It seems that the next generation had to engage with these reflections.

#### 4. Present generation of systematic theologians

The well-known textbook *Doing Theology in context* (De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1994) was not only published in a symbolically significant year but also inaugurated a new era. The chapter on the Trinity by Catholic scholar Brian Gaybba is a significant contribution. It was well informed by the work of scholars such as Boff, Gunton, LaCugna, Moltmann and Rahner, and also signals the potential impact on society. Gaybba claims that 'the doctrine of the Trinity has an undeniable advantage as a theological basis for reflecting on social structures' (Gaybba 1994:86). The value of the Trinity as 'socio-political model' is to be found in 'total sharing' among people; he also emphasises that the Trinity should be allowed 'to cast sufficient critical light on nationalism' (Gaybba 1994:86, 87). Unfortunately, this excellent article was not followed up with further work on the Trinity.

John de Gruchy, who straddles in a sense both the previous and the present era and who continues with outstanding work even after his retirement, is an interesting case. His extensive oeuvre does not evidence that he is a Trinitarian thinker; this can be clearly seen in his own evaluation of this more recent work on God as the ultimate mystery (De Gruchy 2014:157–166). In his work *Christianity and democracy*, he has a subsection on 'the Triune God and human sociality' in which he refers to the doctrine to explain the significance of the *imago Dei* for human relationality (De Gruchy 1995:238–243).

A bibliographical overview of publications by the contemporary South African systematic theologians on Trinitarian theology conveys an impression that they have clearly taken note of the 'turn to the Trinity' in twentieth-century theology. There is definitely a much greater awareness of the decisive importance of the Trinity for doing theology and there are indications of an exploration of Trinitarian resources for distinct research interests.

Dirkie Smit, in an overview of the present developments in Systematic Theology, identifies the Trinitarian Renaissance as the first of such new interests. He views this as the self-critical reflection by the Christian community on his own conviction (Smit 2013:387f). In another contribution, he investigates specifically what a Reformed understanding of the Trinity may entail (Smit 2009). He emphasises that all Reformed theologians consider the Trinity as central to their work. One cannot,

however, escape the impression that there is a certain hesitation in his work towards the immanent Trinity and to the practical value, that is, sociopolitical, of the doctrine (see Smit 2009:65, 72, 75). The emphasis is more on the action of God (Smit 2009:66). This discussion by Smit gives a good understanding of why the Trinitarian symbol has played such a small role in political life. If the emphasis is predominantly on the agency of God, other potential discursive employments, for example, mimetic and heuristic ones, are eclipsed. Nico Koopman's interest in the Triune God comes from his work on public theology and he proposes 'a Trinitarian approach' (Koopman 2007). The typical stress, identified by Smit, is clearly seen in his proposal: Koopman is interested in the work of God and he utilises the planetary theology of McFague to develop this so-called 'Trinitarian approach', which is basically a compilation of multiple ideas associated with each divine person. As long as a theology does not fully account for *what doing Trinitarian theology entails*, it will come across as rather incoherent, as can be seen in this work. The very implications of God's identity as Triune do not crystallise in Koopman's work.

Some of the most informed and creative work is found in a number of articles by Robert Vosloo. What makes his work particularly important is the hermeneutical exploration of the Trinitarian doctrine with categories found in post-modern thought, for example 'gift' and 'hospitality'. With Trinitarian resources, he interprets human personhood, Christian moral life, and otherness and hospitality (Vosloo 1999, 2002, 2004b). Vosloo is aware of the dangers of an uncritical analogical movement from the Trinity to human life but still believes that 'Trinitarian theology will continue to play an important role to free our imagination' (Vosloo 2004b:89).

David T. Williams (2003) wrote arguably the most comprehensive work on the practical implications of Trinitarian theology – *The 'two hands of God': Imaging the Trinity*. The basic assumption is that '[t]he church should then act in a Trinitarian way in the world, reflecting the nature of God in the way it acts' (Williams 2003:14). He employs the notion of 'imitating the Trinity' without reservation (see Williams 2003:22ff), and discusses then in successive chapters mission, harmony between people, marriage, the socio-economic order, poverty, the population crisis, environmentalism and worship. There is, sadly, no evidence of recognition of his work by other systematic theologians. One may question whether the work does not suffer from 'over-reach' and whether it does not precisely exemplify the projections of social Trinitarianism which makes it so suspect to its many critics. For example, Williams wants to justify exclusive heterosexuality with an appeal to the Trinity (Williams 2003:72ff). Analogical thinking should be approached with nuance and not in the way he does. The contribution by E. Conradie (2013) about an

adequate Trinitarian theology is crucial. His focus is on ecology, and he places this in the complex frame of the relationship between creation and salvation. This line of thinking deserves further exploration.

It should also be noted that a number of doctoral theses have been written on the Trinity as an expression of the new interest. Hadebe (2013) explored the Trinitarian confession for gender challenges in the context of HIV and Aids; Kombo (2000) worked on African Trinitarian theology; Kritzinger (2004) on Walter Kasper; Leene (2013) on the Trinity and gender relations; Van Wyk (2013) on a Trinitarian ecclesiology; and Verhoef (2008) on Robert Jenson.<sup>7</sup>

When one compares the two eras – before and after 1994 – and their employment of Trinitarian resources, there are obviously common emphases, but there are also some distinct shifts to be identified. There is undeniably greater interest in and enthusiasm for Trinitarian reflection. One encounters a greater variety of themes, problems addressed, and theologians engaged. In an interesting article, Van den Brink and Van Erp (2009) investigated the question whether the new interest in the Triune God has affected Dutch theology and came to fairly negative conclusions about the embrace and integration of this development. My impression, in terms of South African Systematic Theology, is fairly much the same. Some affirming nods to the Trinitarian Renaissance in one or two articles do not amount to an in-depth constructive engagement with the confession and its implications for understanding the Christian vision and for social life. Three weaknesses characterise South African Systematic Theology: a neglect of Patristic theology, an occupation with narrow research foci, and a failure to construct comprehensive material ‘dogmatics’ like the older scholars, and a hesitance to think consistently from the perspective of the central God-symbol. When saying these, one should immediately acknowledge excellent work being done on ecology, the faith–science dialogue, and public theology. Behind the three weaknesses could be historical or theological, but also social, reasons. What is clearly needed is greater acquaintance and engagement with the Patristic theology, new interest to articulate comprehensive and material constructions of the Christian vision, and a deep intuition of the decisive and critical centrality of the God question. This should be coupled with an acute sense of belonging, of social location and that theology happens in this dialectic between identity and relevance.

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7 A number of singular reflections, although not part of sustained attention but of excellent quality, should be mentioned. See for example Loubser (2003) and Theron (2008).

## 5. Excuse: An example of new Systematic Theology

At this point in the argument, it may be fruitful to glance briefly at the international scene and note the vitality of Systematic Theology and the reconstructive projects underway.<sup>8</sup> It is worth mentioning the ambitious work by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. This Finnish scholar, from Pentecostal orientation, is writing a five-volume work which he calls *A constructive Christian theology for the pluralistic world* (see Kärkkäinen 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016). His point of departure is a radically changed world, and he explicitly calls for a theology which is *coherent, inclusive, dialogical and hospitable* (Kärkkäinen 2013:1–33). What is impressive in his reconstructive work is the attention to Biblical theology, Trinitarian theology, a conversation with global Christianity, faith/science dialogue, voices of the marginalised ‘other’, and world religions in the articulation of the material Christian vision. Obviously, one could raise critical questions and cannot copy this for the South African context, but the approach here warrants careful attention.

## 6. Future of the Triune God in South African Systematic Theology

The future will arguably always surprise us, as the movement of the Triune God can never be domesticated in our extrapolations from our existing knowledge. But if one is audacious enough to intimate an agenda, it may include the following *six whispers*:

The great theological advances of the twentieth century – the new interest in the Trinity and the explicit turn to contextuality – should be nurtured and brought into close mutual interaction. The challenge may be to map a full Trinitarian theology for (post)apartheid South Africa. This will require a retrieval of the paramount importance of the *God-symbol* to orientate life, and a deep commitment to a sense of place. Within this dialectic, Systematic Theology could navigate its future direction.

There is much hype about *interdisciplinarity*, but little is really accomplished about material Systematic Theology. Responsible speaking about God requires scholarly insights of Biblical studies, of historical theology, of philosophy of religion, of spirituality, but also of cultural theory. The task of an interdisciplinary approach to the God-question has not been addressed.

Such an interdisciplinary approach should be enriched by employing intentionally a variety of interpretative frameworks, for example, alterity,

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8 New multi-volume projects are being developed by, for example, S. Coakley, G. Ward, and K. Sonderegger.



faith/science dialogue, faith/art dialogue, global voices (especially from the South), and world religions. At the moment, most of these theologies function in a compartmentalised manner without much integration and coherence. Each interpretative framework elicits some vision on the divine mystery. The voices and the instruments should be conducted into a symphony.

What the referent to the linguistic construct 'Triune God' entails can never be exhausted and domesticated. The mystery of the Ultimate should deepen, but at the same time, the human naming of the identity of this Reality should continue. Apophatic theology and kataphatic theology cannot do without the other. The imaginative and Trinitarian rethinking of the *divine perfections for our place* is a particular outstanding task. What attributes do we select for this context, and how do we interpret them in a Trinitarian way? This is a theological, but also an ethical and political responsibility.

Many attempts at studying Trinitarian theology can be found, but little account is given as to *how* this should be done. How does the God-referent function discursively and rhetorically? Most of the time, the approach is to elaborate on the multiple manifestations of divine action, sometimes modelling is used. Much more is at stake. God can be understood in terms of *agency*, but the resistance to *mimesis* in unfounded and should be properly described. But God also could function *heuristically*. How these three interact should be carefully distinguished and described to advance *theo-thinking*. 'God' is for many a form of inhibiting reality. The very *categories of God association* should be redefined. 'God' is the fecund source of novel, imaginative, and creative thinking. The glory of the Triune God is the source of the beauty of theology.



## 2

# God in Systematic Theology after Barth

Rian Venter

### 1. Introduction

Taking stock of developments in an academic discipline may be fruitful. An overview of the state of scholarship may identify the trends, and signal unexplored areas requiring further research. In an era marked by the need for conversation among various disciplines, such an endeavour may acquaint dialogue partners with resources available. In this article, I intend to undertake such a venture, knowing how audacious and perilous this might be. To map the terrain of reflection by Systematic Theology on God is not the easiest of tasks. However, at the same time, the complexity of the landscape should not paralyse the cartographer. Preliminary maps may help others refine the contours. I will briefly describe the contemporary state of Systematic Theology and justify the chronological starting-point, prior to identifying and discussing five major trends. I will then conclude with the question as to the possibility of new insights generated by Systematic Theology.

### 2. Systematic Theology and God – plurality

To sketch the face of the contemporary state of scholarship of academic disciplines has become a particularly challenging and virtually unmanageable assignment. The growth of knowledge and proliferation of divergent approaches do not allow easy profiling. Only one description may do justice to the contemporary state of a discipline such as Systematic Theology – *plurality*. Even a seemingly straightforward description of the task of this theological field – ‘... a conceptual articulation of Christian claims about God and everything else in relation to God, characterised by comprehensiveness and coherence’ (Webster 2007:2) – refracts in practice in the most dazzling array of colours.<sup>1</sup> The labels given to their

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<sup>1</sup> For one other definition by a theologian who wrote extensively on the nature of doctrine, see Vanhoozer (2005a:773) – ‘Systematic Theology is the cognitive and passionate enterprise that seeks to know and love

theologies by scholars – confessional, post-liberal, radical orthodox, feminist, public, global, and African, to name but a few – intimate already something of the nature of the landscape to navigate.

If the relevance-identity dialectic underlying the task of Systematic Theology, and so well-articulated by Moltmann (1974:7–31), is utilised as initial entrance to the present horizon, something of the *dynamics of the plurality* becomes clearer. The identity of the Christian faith itself is not a fixed stable essence, but a complex narrative, which is creatively appropriated by people from different geographical and denominational locations, in their multiple identities of culture, gender and class, and with their diverse interests and values. The story of the plurality in Systematic Theology is one of place, perspective and interpretation. The spectrum of traditional ‘sources’ of theology – Scripture, tradition, reason – has been expanded by an appreciation of experience (often perceived as historically suppressed) and by dialogue (with non-theological disciplines).

It may be fruitful to briefly attend to two astute *observers* of the field of Systematic Theology for an orientation to the *current state* of the discipline. The Reformed theologian Smit (2013:387–398) suggests five trends: a self-critical reflection on the Trinity in the Christian Faith; a confession of the Faith in light of numerous fundamental questions; a reaction to the ‘spirit of the times’; an understanding of the Faith in conversation with the ‘other’, and attention to worship directed towards God. The Roman Catholic scholar Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (2011:64–74), in a fine overview, identifies five ‘decenterings’ that have taken place in Systematic Theology, namely subjectivity, method, progress, the elites, and individualism.<sup>2</sup> The discipline of Systematic Theology, like other fields of study, is pluralistic and dynamic, and resists simplistic representation, let alone easy distillations in the form of typologies.

The *ramifications* of this condition for the *question about God* are obvious. Drastic developments and shifts have taken place, which warrant careful attention, but no straightforward description is possible. A fairly large number of attempts to indicate trends and changes are available, but none is adequately comprehensive.<sup>3</sup> Four *examples* of such discussions may be summarised to intimate new emphases and sensibilities, as well as

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the God of the gospel and to demonstrate its understanding in forms of obedient speech and practice’.

2 The rich textures Smit and Schüssler Fiorenza accord to their respective interpretations cannot be summarised, in this instance, but should be pointed out.

3 See, for example, Schüssler Fiorenza (2001), Callen (2004), Reeling Brouwer (2011), and Venter (2012). It is interesting to note *what issues* are identified as ‘nuwe weë’ by the South African theologian Durand

the crucial role that a particular reading of society, religion or philosophy does play in the discourses on God. Gilkey (1982), a theologian with a sensitive antenna for changes in society,<sup>4</sup> in a somewhat older treatment, highlights issues of knowledge, language, agency, *temporality*, and *history*. The influence of thinkers such as Hegel and Whitehead is pervasive: ‘God ... shares in the metaphysical categories of process: potentiality, change, relatedness, development, and dependence and passivity’ (1982:79). Having discussed the well-known trajectories of, for example, death-of-God theologies and open theism, Kärkkäinen (2004) proceeds to focus his particular interest on *contextual and non-Western* approaches such as Native American, Immigrant, Latina, African, and Asian perspectives. His work is a timely and fruitful retrieval of traditions ignored in standard and conventional textbooks. In an impressive ‘mapping (of) frontiers’, Johnson (2007) discusses how *experiences of suffering, poverty and racism* – in different contexts – determine talk about God. What makes her work particularly well textured is the inclusion of a discussion of religious pluralism and newer scientific cosmologies. With his interest in the intersection of theology and philosophy, Shults (2005:15–94) identifies *three anxieties* that have riddled thinking about God: the Cartesian (that is, about certain knowledge), the Ockhamist (about the notion of ‘person’), and the Newtonian (about the nature of causality).

### 3. Barth and God – the event who loves in freedom

To start an overview of the reflections in Systematic Theology on God with Karl Barth (1886–1968) is a natural choice and requires hardly any justification. His position as a major Protestant theologian of the twentieth century has been firmly cemented. A number of *impulses* emanating from his work are applicable to the focus of this investigation. His theology is an intentional reaction to nineteenth-century Liberal Theology, with its captivity to modernity, and as such, functions as a bridge to a more *postmodern* approach, which subverts human reason in its drive to domesticate God.<sup>5</sup> The basic, but decisive *moves* made by Barth should be carefully discerned. The doctrine of God is retrieved and located at the *very beginning* of the dogmatic enterprise (that is in *Church Dogmatics I/1*), and this is done in a consistent Trinitarian manner. By doing this, ‘its content

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(1976) in an older work: transcendence/immanence, personhood, Trinity, attribute tradition, suffering, and atheism.

4 See, for example his 1985 article in which he pleads for a ‘hermeneutic of events’.

5 See the study of Johnson (1997) on God in Barth and his discussion of the postmodern foundations of theology already present in Barth’s theology (esp. pp. 184–191).

(becomes) ... decisive and controlling for the whole of dogmatics' (Barth 1975:303) and consequently 'the basic presupposition of the doctrine of God' (:312). Furthermore, by doing so, he emphatically distinguishes a *specific Christian understanding* of God from a generic theistic one.<sup>6</sup> The twenty-first-century quest for a 'post-metaphysical' understanding of the divine is already prominently present in Barth's work. His resistance to 'the threatened absorption of the doctrine of God into a doctrine of being' is expressly pronounced (Barth 1957:260). Because God is who He is in the act of His revelation, Barth can hold being and act together, and can assert that 'God's godhead consists in the fact that it is an event' (1957:263). God should be understood as *event*, as act, and as life (1957:264). When addressing the fundamental question of what it is to be God, what *makes God God* and what God's essence is, Barth advances his well-known description of God as 'the One who loves in freedom' (1975:257). Having argued this, he then proceeds to a discussion of the *traditional attributes* of God, or what he terms 'perfections' of God. The manner in which this is executed should be carefully noted. Traditional attributes are *dialectically* 'paired', for example, grace and holiness, mercy and righteousness, constancy and omnipotence. But, and this is crucial, the treatment *follows* the extensive Trinitarian exposition, and the perfections are interpreted in a Trinitarian way.<sup>7</sup>

The difference this makes is immense. *Two examples* may suffice to illustrate this. When interpreting the omnipresence of God, this new starting-point allows Barth to introduce imaginatively the notion of divine *spatiality* (Barth 1957:468–476) and to prefigure the central concern of the current 'turn to space' and its connection with relationality. A Trinitarian interpretation of the glory of God, the 'sum of all divine perfections', opens possibilities to refer to enjoyment and divine *beauty* (Barth 1957:650–666). Again, relationality prompts this: the form of the divine life, the triunity of God, 'is the secret of His beauty'. The ramifications of a re-visioning of divine attributes are vast: only these two examples allow for a theological contribution to questions about the built environment and to aesthetics. The title of the volume of essays – *Dogmatics after Barth* (Thomas, Reeling Brouwer & McCormack 2012) – captures the situation of Systematic Theology; it is thinking and speaking God after the far-reaching insights of this theologian.

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6 For excellent studies of Barth's understanding of the Trinity, see the seminal work by Jüngel (2001) and Torrance (2000). The volume *Trinitarian theology after Barth* (Habets & Tolliday 2011) represents in-depth and contemporary engagements with this aspect of his oeuvre.

7 For a study of the divine perfections in Barth's theology, see Price (2011).

To describe the developments after Barth confronts one with various options, one may focus on major *theologians* who made particular contributions to the field with new insight, or on recurring *themes* and motifs being discussed, or on important *texts* that have become ‘classics’ in the discipline. My decision is different from these possibilities, and comprises an awareness of intra-disciplinary, sociological, cultural and epistemological shifts that have taken place and decisively determined the course of thinking about God. Five major trends can be identified and the sheer volume of literature on each discourse may warrant such an approach.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. Five trends on God

##### 4.1 Trinitarian renaissance – the relational God who invites

It took several decades before the insights of Barth came to fruition. A new interest in the doctrine of the Trinity is arguably the *outstanding development* in Systematic Theology of the second part of the twentieth century. Usually, the two Karls – Barth and Rahner – are credited with the motivation for this new appreciation. In a sense, their work presents similar intuitions: both felt uneasy with the term ‘person’, and both insisted that God’s eternal nature corresponds to God’s salvific action in history. Rahner (1997[1970]:22) became especially known for his axiom that ‘the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity’. A detailed *history of the recovery* of the Trinity may convey a more complex story, which credits Hegel and the German Idealists of the nineteenth century for the new interest,<sup>9</sup> and which evidences a narrative of a doctrine never totally eclipsed since the Patristic era.<sup>10</sup> That an exceptional enthusiasm for Trinitarian thinking captivated systematic theologians can hardly be missed from especially the 1970s onwards. Some excellent overviews record the state of scholarship.<sup>11</sup>

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8 I am well aware of the preliminary nature of my proposal, and of the omissions. In a longer overview, I would also include discussions of theologians such as Hartshorne and contemporary process theologians, Tillich and Von Balthasar, as well as discourses on atheism and on the ‘open view’ theology.

9 Sanders (2012:22–25) points to the three major ideas that gave this stimulus – world history, human experience, and the retrieval of the past – and the decisive influence of Hegel.

10 See especially Marshall (2004).

11 See O’Collins (1999), Grenz (2004), Kärkkäinen (2009), Phan (2011), Emery & Levering (2011), and Schwöbel (1995 & 2014).

Some of the *main features* of this new interest should be identified. There is strong insistence that the specific *Christian identification* of God is unique – one God with a differentiated life of three persons, Father, Son and Spirit. The *economy* of the three Persons should be the starting-point for a reflection about the nature of God, which forms the basis for the work *ad extra*. One encounters a particular appreciation for the *Eastern tradition* and the Cappadocian Fathers who prioritised ‘person’, and not substance, in their metaphysics. This resulted in, arguably, the major tenet of this Renaissance – the emphasis on the *relationality* of God.<sup>12</sup> God’s very life is communion, and the traditional question about the unity of the three persons is addressed with the notion of *perichoresis*. The articulation of a ‘social doctrine of the Trinity’ inevitably opened possibilities to explore the *practical* – that is, social – implications of this traditionally obscure doctrine.

Apart from the flood of practical applications, the *scholarly spin-offs* of the new valuation are significant. One encounters new studies on the Trinity and the Bible,<sup>13</sup> the history of the early development up to Nicea,<sup>14</sup> the theologies of major and influential thinkers such as Calvin,<sup>15</sup> and neglected fields such as empire.<sup>16</sup> A comprehensive work, *The Oxford handbook of the Trinity* (Emery & Levering 2011), evidences the wide-ranging academic impact of the Trinitarian renewal.

In no way should this academic recovery of the Trinity in Systematic Theology be presented as a ‘peaceful’ process. Most of the central elements identified are severely *contested*. The British theologian Holmes (2012b:2), for example, is outright hostile and claims: ‘I see the twentieth-century renewal of Trinitarian theology as depending in large part on concepts and ideas that cannot be found in patristic, mediaeval, or Reformation accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity.’ Apart from typical scholarly conflicts of interpretation, for example on Augustine’s Trinitarian theology, major salvos are launched against both the *social interpretations* of the Trinity<sup>17</sup> and the *practical applications* of the doctrine.<sup>18</sup> For those accepting the

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12 For a brief but excellent discussion of the ‘turn to relationality’, see Shults (2005:5–9).

13 For a good overview, see Swain (2017).

14 The major study by Ayres (2004) deserves attention. Ayres & Radde-Gallwitz (2008) summarize major new developments in Patristic Studies on God.

15 For example, Baars (2004).

16 See Rieger (2007, especially chapters 1 & 2).

17 For a good discussion, see Van den Brink (2014).

18 See Wisse (2011:3–10).

political implications of the Trinitarian confession, a major dispute is whether it is a matter of 'imitation' or 'participation'.<sup>19</sup>

Despite disagreements among systematic theologians, the *questions generated* by this discourse are pertinent to any serious doctrine of God. First, the claim of *continuity with tradition* raises the problematic as to whether the history of God in the development of human societies does not render fundamental shifts unavoidable and even preferable. Secondly, the transfer from first-order expressions (doxological descriptions) to second-order reflection (ontological propositional statements) is inevitable. The Hellenisation thesis of Von Harnack is no longer uncritically accepted. It is a natural development to articulate the content of faith in the *metaphysical categories* available at the particular time. The shift from substantial to relational ontology is arguably a most productive development. Apart from the fact that faith is expressed in an idiom more intelligible to contemporary people,<sup>20</sup> the possibility does exist that a genuine new insight into the nature of Ultimate Reality can be gained. This is the argument made by Zizioulas (2008:47–69) in his interpretation of the Cappadocians: essence and person are co-fundamental, as there is no bare 'essence'. Identity can only be described in terms of relationships and, in this way, 'the Trinity gives us the truth of our own existence' (2008:64). Thirdly, the advocacy for some form of analogical thinking between Trinity and society underlines the *ethical consequences* of discourses on God; they are never innocent; they do matter. Hardly anyone, let alone committed social Trinitarians, will claim a direct and un-nuanced line from monotheism to autocracy, or from Trinitarianism to democracy. In his well-known article with the provocative title 'The Trinity is our social programme', Volf (1998:408) signals the direction for the link between Trinity and society: 'What notion of identity is inscribed in the character and relation of divine persons?' With associations such as ex-stasis, mutuality, reciprocity, self-donation, gifting, and hospitality, the contours of a Trinitarian social ethic start to crystallise.

#### 4.2 Rethinking the attribute tradition – the hospitable God who suffers

A discussion of divine attributes has been a constitutive part of the systematic treatment of the doctrine of God.<sup>21</sup> This discourse has been

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19 See, for example, Tanner (2012). She rejects social Trinitarianism and its insistence on the possibility of 'imitating' God in society, but maintains the political ramifications in terms of 'participation' in the divine life.

20 Cunningham (2003) argues the connection between postmodernity and relationality well.

21 For a good account of the scholarly history of the attributes since Early Modernity, see Holmes (2012a).



under drastic *reconstruction*, especially since Schleiermacher.<sup>22</sup> Unease has been increasingly expressed about the Greek metaphysical influence and whether a more dynamic and biblical determination is not required. Gunton (2003:2) conveys this sentiment with his view that ‘the Christian doctrine of God is for much of its history a hybrid of two organisms’.<sup>23</sup> Situating the discussion of attributes *prior* to an exposition of the Trinitarian confession, especially in Reformed Scholasticism, was fatal.

One encounters *significant attempts* to redress this, and one can refer to some *Dutch contributions* in this regard. Under the influence of Brümmer, the so-called Utrecht School submitted an impressive rethinking of the attributes from an explicit personalistic perspective (Van den Brink & Sarot 1995). The characteristics of God should be interpreted from the reality of a personal relationship. The consequences for an understanding of traditional notions such as immutability or omnipotence are obvious. In a splendid approach, Berkhof (1993:115–149) executes two moves: think about attributes from the notion of ‘encounter’ (‘ontmoeting’) and juxtapose the characteristics, for example holy love, and vulnerable power (‘weerloze overmacht’). In their comprehensive recent Dogmatics, Van den Brink and Van der Kooi (2012:137–144) accept the Trinity as ‘ordeningsprincipe voor de eigenschappenleer’, but do not opt for a dialectical ‘pairing’, preferring to view the properties of transcendence as qualifications of God’s turning towards human beings (2012:144).<sup>24</sup> In the recent monograph on God, Muis (2016) utilizes the Lord’s Prayer as entrance to his discussion of the attributes, and consequently discusses love, holiness, righteousness, power (‘Gods macht’), and eternity.

Other thinkers such as Jüngel and Krötke are convinced that the attributes should be explored in a *Trinitarian way*.<sup>25</sup> God’s very divinity should be consistently viewed in terms of *event and relationality*.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the narrative of the incarnation, with the cross as central

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22 Attributes are not so much an expression of the nature of God, as *an account of how God is experienced* by human beings.

23 In a comparison of the ‘two theisms’, Plantinga, Thompson & Lundberg (2010:99–108) describe the differences well in terms of *method, content and results*: metaphysical causality vs revelation, timelessness and immutability vs communion, and determinism vs personalism.

24 The underlying assumption is to maintain a distinction between ‘hoogheids-’ and ‘toewendingseigenschappen’, or transcendence and condescension.

25 For a good study of their theologies of the divine attributes, see Holmes (2007).

26 Only one example may suffice in this regard: Webster (2003:44f), a theologian with orthodox inclinations, but also with an express Trinitarian appreciation, emphasises that *holiness* is a relational concept.



feature, makes all the difference. Traditional attributes such as simplicity, immutability and omnipotence require radical re-interpretation. The interest in *love* as expressing something fundamentally true of the Christian God continues to interest theologians.<sup>27</sup>

It may be pertinent to mention, in this context, the seminal and well-known contribution of Moltmann with his *The crucified God* (1974), which challenges the traditional doctrine of the *impassibility* of God. The cross is, in the first instance, an event between Father and Son and is not external to the 'immanent Trinity'; that is, what happens in time affects the very divine life. A doctrine of divine passibility (capable of feeling, especially suffering) is required: God can be affected by creation; the nature of love makes suffering inevitable. Moltmann (1974:227) mentions that 'God's being is in suffering, and the suffering is in God's being itself, because God is love'. In line with the general orientation of his theology, the social applications are not far from Moltmann's (1974:222) mind: 'For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved.' The dust has not settled with Moltmann's provocation and one encounters a spectrum of reactions, from outright rebuttals such as Weinandy's (2000) to careful and nuanced interactions such as Vanhoozer's (2010).

It may be justifiable to mention, in this context, a major insight: understanding God's 'being' in terms of eschatology and explicitly the *future*. The contribution of Moltmann and Pannenberg can hardly be overstressed. In his magisterial *Theology of hope* (1967:16), Moltmann argues that eschatology is 'not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such'. Prioritising the notion of promise allows him to follow Bloch in viewing God with 'the future as his essential nature' (1967:16). Because the future is something qualitatively different from what is experienced as history, it can function as a paradigm for transcendence (Moltmann 1969:196f). Pannenberg developed similar ideas, talking of God 'as the power of the future' (1971:244), and 'future as a mode of God's being' (1969:242). In his later work (1991:401ff), Pannenberg argues that the eternity of God embraces God's futurity.<sup>28</sup> The innovation of this perspective for a doctrine of God can hardly be over-emphasised.<sup>29</sup>

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Such an interpretation might make quite a difference whether it refers to distancing or the opposite – involvement.

27 For a good discussion, see Vanhoozer (2001).

28 For a detailed discussion of 'God of the future' in Pannenberg's theology, see Mostert (2002:127–182). For a wider discussion in Lutheran theology, see Shults (2003).

29 Kasper (1977:7) opines: 'Gott und die Zukunft. Kaum ein anderes Thema ist mehr charakteristisch für die Umbrüche und Neuorientierungen, die

The *crux* of what is at stake in this discourse should be recognised: what are contemporary and primary associations with Ultimacy or the Divine, and what metaphysical or paradigmatic frames of reference inform the discussions? In simple language: what distinguishes God from creation? According to Greek metaphysics, this was fairly clear. The turn to relationality has complicated this, and the (critical) embrace of sensibilities of postmodern thought even further. The focus is not only on a *re-interpretation* of traditional attributes, but also on the possibility of *novel characterisation*. It is noteworthy that an informed scholar such as Kärkkäinen (2014: chapter 14), in his mature work, extensively attends to ‘divine hospitality’. Changing times may encourage imaginative retrievals of resources from tradition, in order to characterise the divine in new ways.

#### 4.3 Irruption of the other – the disabled God who liberates

The impulses wrought by Barth do have stark limitations. Systematic Theology, especially since the 1960s, has decisively started to move ‘beyond the pale’.<sup>30</sup> A new way of doing theology emerged, one which starts with the concrete *historical experiences* of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination. In this instance, the ‘de-centerings’ mentioned by Schüssler Fiorenza come into view. The suffering people experience because of their sex/gender, race, poverty (class), and physical disability becomes the optic to reflect on their faith in God. For lack of a common denominator to name this trend, I suggest it is discussed with reference to *alterity*, and refers to discursive exclusion due to social or material identities and conditions.<sup>31</sup>

This development amounts to a *major shift* in theology. The *literature* on each one of the ‘exclusions’ and their respective theologies is, understandably, virtually impossible to master. The evolving trajectories and the geographical identities complicate the situation. Johnson’s (2007) work provides good bibliographies, but also with conspicuous omissions, for example, disability and sexual orientation. I can merely make some suggestions to convey the importance and productivity in this regard

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sich in der protestantischen wie in der katholischen Theologie des 20. Jahrhunderts ereignet haben.’ It is a question whether this fundamental insight has not been eclipsed by other optics.

30 See the volume of critical essays entitled *Beyond the pale: Reading theology from the margins* (De la Torre & Floyd-Thomas 2011), which interacts with theologians throughout history, indicating how their social location determined their theologies.

31 Rieger (2001) situates this unfinished ‘turn’ perceptively to various other ‘turns’ in theology; for example, to the self, to the Wholly Other, and to language and the text.

for gender,<sup>32</sup> race,<sup>33</sup> class,<sup>34</sup> disability,<sup>35</sup> and sexuality.<sup>36</sup> What makes for interesting and unsettling reading is a comparative glance at recent comprehensive 'Dogmatics'.<sup>37</sup> Alterity, in its manifold manifestations, is often conspicuously absent. The volume by the USA workgroup on Constructive Christian Theology – *Constructive theology* (Jones & Lakeland 2005) – is an exception and is one of the few projects to take plurality and alterity seriously.

What this new sensibility may point to for a doctrine of God should be examined. At least *three* such *ramifications* may be intimated. *One*, *thinking and speaking about God* can never be divorced from power. Alterity demands a new *epistemology*, a conception of knowledge that acknowledges location, perspective, and resistance. Any doctrine of God without – at least implicitly – a critical epistemology would be inadequate. A farewell to the seemingly innocent and objective knowledge of God is unavoidable. Knowing God should be mediated by the face of the other. *Two*, a *new vision of God* has been emerging. A critical hermeneutic of alterity resulted in a re-reading of Scripture and tradition, exploring the surplus of meaning in texts and discovering resources of solidarity, vulnerability, justice, and liberation, for example, exodus, exile, migration, empire, and crucifixion. These texts teem with gender, and ethnic and bodily dynamics. The challenge for Systematic Theology is to integrate these motifs into constructive proposals. The central role of *language* should be pointed out. At stake is the very possibility of speech about God,<sup>38</sup> and the performative function of language. This may entail intentional *re-naming* (for example,

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32 For a good general introduction, see Grey (2001). For creative re-interpretations, see McFague (1987) and Johnson (1992). For an informed overview of feminist Trinitarian theology, see Bacon (2012).

33 For representative treatments of God in Black Theology, see Jones (1987) and Maimela (1991). For interesting discussions of the Trinity in the theology of Cone and Hopkins, see McGee (2016) and Buhring (2012), respectively.

34 For a thorough study, see Araya (1987), who refers extensively to L & C Boff, Dussel, Ellacuría, Gutierrez, and Sobrino.

35 On the notion of a 'disabled God', see Cooper (1992), Eiesland (1994), and Swinton (2011).

36 For an important recent study from the perspective of Trinitarian Theology and Queer Theory, see Tonstad (2016).

37 To mention only a few published during the past few years: Horton (2011), Van den Brink & Van der Kooi (2012), and Thiselton (2015).

38 Jüngel's (1983) theology is relevant in this regard. He explores the 'speakability of God' in relation to the humanity of God, love and the Trinity.

work by McFague or Johnson),<sup>39</sup> or the *retrieval* of a central theme (for example, such as *life* in the work of Gutierrez [1991]). It is striking how *justice* remains underdeveloped in a treatment of the attributes.<sup>40</sup> One may even raise the question as to whether a belated theological correction is not being manifested in this discourse, one that is much more in step with the thrusts of biblical narratives. Taking alterity seriously means embracing the constructive nature of Systematic Theology. *Three, the function of God* – discursively – has changed. God is more than the heuristic symbol to explain the world or bring existential meaning;<sup>41</sup> God disrupts, judges, comforts, and empowers;<sup>42</sup> images of God function;<sup>43</sup> attention to the ethical performance of theological constructs must be attended to and accounted for. No responsible doctrine of God can suppress an estimation of its performative effects.

#### 4.4 Coming of global Christianity – the postcolonial God who heals

Mapping the shifts in the Systematic Theological discourse on God needs not only the assistance of metaphysics and cultural theory, but also sociology of religion to register the radical *geographical and demographical mutations* Christianity has been experiencing. The so-called ‘shift to the South’ has transformed the face of Christianity, and the reception of the Christian God in Africa, Asia and South America warrants study. At least *four challenges* are confronting Systematic Theology: the translation of God in non-Western categories; the encounter with indigenous and other world religions; the needs of Pentecostal and Charismatic believers, and the quest for postcolonial theologies.

This relatively new situation means ‘the end of Systematic Theology’<sup>44</sup> and *significant work* has already been undertaken on Global

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39 McFague’s (1987) alternative renaming is well-known – God as Mother, Lover and Friend. Johnson’s (1992) proposal – *SHE WHO IS* – involves a multidimensional reinterpretation, one that employs the Sophia tradition and Trinitarian theology.

40 For one exception, see the work of the Christian philosopher Wolterstorff (2006).

41 For the ‘functions of the symbol ‘God’’, see Kaufman (1993:301–31). Despite his plea for a ‘new conception of God’, one cannot but escape the impression that his proposal for a ‘humanising’ and ‘relativising’ symbol remains a-historical.

42 Carr (1981) suggests the notion of the ‘God who is involved’ to capture a general trend in theology.

43 See Venter (2008a).

44 See the ground-breaking article by D’Costa (1992) with this title. He correctly anticipated that ‘the future of Christian Systematic Theology goes with a whole range of new partners’ and that the Christian doctrine of God would come under ‘severe questioning’ (326, 331).

Theology and God.<sup>45</sup> Arguably, the most impressive Systematic Theology written in this respect is the 5-volume project *A constructive Christian theology for the pluralistic world* (2013-2017) by the Finnish scholar Kärkkäinen. His explicit assumption is that the world for theology has changed; that the voice of theologians from the South should be attended to, and that world religions are important conversation partners. His conviction is one of 'delight in the potential of an encounter with the other without denying either parties' distinctive features' (2014:356).<sup>46</sup>

What this 'global turn' in the doctrine of God entails can be briefly described with reference to *Africa*. The great historian of Christianity in the non-Western world, Andrew Walls (2002:119–129), has perceptively described the *actual dynamics* of the encounter of Christianity and African (Traditional) Religion. The elements of the religious map in Africa – God, divinities, ancestors and objects of power – have not been replaced; they have been reconfigured. The God-component was magnified, the divinities demonised, the ancestors continued, and the objects of power drawn into the Christian world. This re-ordering has continued access to power, prosperity, and protection. This may also explain the attractiveness of Christianity and the growth of Pentecostalism with the emphasis on power, healing and prosperity. The *reception of the Trinity* has found, interestingly, wide favour among African theologians, and creative re-interpretations have been submitted.<sup>47</sup> The association of the Trinity with communion is appealing in an African context where relationality is valued. Some African scholars such as Nyamiti have attempted to furnish an alternative ontology, based on ancestorship.<sup>48</sup> To my knowledge, no thorough African *postcolonial reflection* on God has been produced.<sup>49</sup> However, with the current insistence on decolonising theology, one may expect this soon.

This discourse on Global Theology focuses on a *new set of themes* that invariably impacts on the traditional doctrine of God. The relation to other construals of Ultimacy cannot escape scrutiny; nor can theology's indebtedness to Greek metaphysics and to modernity, and its involvement in the colonial project. In addition to the motifs conventionally associated

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45 See especially Jeanrond & Lande (2005) and Hintersteiner (2012).

46 Reference to the work by his predecessor at Fuller – Volf (2011) – on the relationship with Islam should be made. Volf's concern is that emphasis on 'different Gods' increases the potential for hostility and violence.

47 Vähäkangas (2000) gives a good overview of older work. For more recent interpretations, see Kombo (2009) and Kunhiyop (2015).

48 For a description of this, see Venter (2008b).

49 Rivera (2007) has offered a 'postcolonial theology of God', but mainly with South American interlocutors.

with these manifestations of the Christian faith, Amos Yong (2014), the American Vietnamese theologian, employs 'renewal' as a label for his Global Theology.

#### 4.5 Quest for interdisciplinarity – the impossible God who gives life

In a sense, theology has never been practised in isolation. Since the earliest accounts, the interaction with philosophy has been a constant conversation partner. This intensified in the late twentieth century. The realisation of the fragmented nature of academic disciplines and the complexity of social problems have increasingly prompted theology to embrace the field of interdisciplinarity. This has developed to such an extent that several clear discourses can be identified. For the purpose of this article, *three* such *conversations* can be attended to – those between Systematic Theology and the sciences, Continental Philosophy of Religion, and Spirituality.<sup>50</sup> Each one of these interactions has resulted in the generation of new questions and sensibilities.

##### 4.5.1 Dialogue between theology and science

The dialogue between *theology and science* has become a vibrant field of academic inquiry, with even several 'generations' of scholars involved, each with its own concerns and contributions. Pertaining to the question of God, at least *three foci* can be singled out. One, the scientific acceptance of an evolutionary, quantum and emergent cosmology, the traditional views of God's relationship to the world, and *divine action* in the world have become hugely problematic. Deistic, monarchical or interventionist

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50 One could refer to at least *two more dialogues*. The conversation with the *Arts* is a fairly new field of study, and the discussions centre on various notions of transcendence. The second one with *Biblical Studies* is obviously crucial, but also complex. In an excellent treatment from the perspective of the New Testament, Rove & Hays (2007) point to the shifting relationship – from unity to separation to unity and separation. Their view is that because of 'the subject matter ... the two disciplines are of necessity inseparable', but remain 'dialectical'. They plea for 'exegetical thickness of doctrine and the theological coherence of biblical exegesis' (452). The irony of the current enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity is that the conversation with Old and New Testament as *academic fields of study* with their respective *histories of scholarship* is, in fact, unexplored. Two examples could illustrate this. The sensitivity to the 'dark side' of God, the so-called 'counter-testimony', in the Old Testament has not been addressed in a Trinitarian way. Systematic Theology has not engaged narratological interests in New Testament Studies, and its application to God as character. This conversation, *reconfigured* as one between various *disciplines*, could open fruitful perspectives for a reflection on God.

models of God-world interaction have become untenable, and the quest is for more intersubjective and organic approaches.<sup>51</sup> This question is obviously not only one of relationship, but also one of the nature of God's action in a cosmos that is simultaneously intelligible in terms of 'laws', but also indeterminate and contingent. The massive research project on 'Divine Action' undertaken by the Vatican Observatory and the Centre for Theology and the Natural Sciences (Berkeley), which resulted in seven volumes of proceedings, is particularly important in this regard.<sup>52</sup> It is clear from this project that there is basically no position of agreement on the quest for a 'casual joint', but at the same time the conviction of divine presence and agency is not abandoned; it has only been complicated. Resistance to miraculous intervention cannot be missed in the discourse.<sup>53</sup> Two, as a result of these investigations, the notion of pantheism has acquired special currency, but has also resulted in severe contestation. Pantheism intends to maintain a distinction between God and world, but at the same time advocates an inextricable intertwining that expresses process, mutuality and reciprocity better than classical theism.<sup>54</sup> Three, the engagement with ecology as dialogue partner emerged with urgency, and the direction of interfacing with the doctrine of God is obvious. As the very life of the planet is under threat, theologies of life are formulated, and God is named as the 'God of life'.<sup>55</sup>

#### 4.5.2 *The 'theological turn'*

The 'theological turn' in *Continental Philosophy of Religion*<sup>56</sup> amounts to one of the most important contemporary probings into the nature of the divine, and one that confronts theology with serious self-examination. Some of the most creative thinkers in this discourse are Marion, Caputo

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51 For a discussion of the various models, see McFague (1993:136–141), who proposes a new appreciation for seeing the world as 'God's body'.

52 See the last two volumes that attempt at bringing order amidst a bewildering diversity of views: Russell, Murphy & Stoeger (2008), and Shults, Murphy & Russell (2009).

53 For an informed discussion, see the work by Conradie (2010, especially the summaries 157ff, 239ff).

54 For excellent and sympathetic discussions, see the volume by Clayton & Peacocke (2004). For a detailed historical treatment, with an eventual defence of classical theism, see Cooper (2006).

55 For an outstanding example of this re-naming, see Conradie (2013) who regards the genitive – *God of life* – as descriptive, that is, life is one of God's salient characteristics, implying 'God is the One who is the origin of life, God is the one to whom life belongs, and God is the One who is the giver of (new) life' (:5).

56 The standard account in this regard is the volume by Janicaud (2001).



and Kearney.<sup>57</sup> The *interplay* between a radical critique of the metaphysical tradition by *Heidegger* with his notion of onto-theology, the views of *Derrida* on ‘gift’ and ‘hospitality’, and the general ethical ‘turn to the other’ in French philosophy by *Levinas* and *Ricoeur*, have deeply impacted reflection on the divine.

The series of debates at the Villanova University and the consequent publications represent some of the most penetrating academic encounters on God of recent time.<sup>58</sup> The quest for a *post-metaphysical* notion of God may arguably be the central issue. Heidegger’s concern about the onto-theological constitution of Western metaphysics – that is, no proper separation between Being and beings, and an inability to assert true Alterity without reducing Transcendence to more of the same – has started to haunt philosophers of religion. Marion’s seminal work *God without being* (1991) signals the direction to go: a conception of the divine that could be understood beyond the horizon of being. His alternative that ‘gift’ and ‘saturation’ are the preferred categories has become hugely influential. For the vast majority of these thinkers, the target for revision is the ‘three-headed monster of metaphysics – the Omni-God of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence’.<sup>59</sup> Caputo’s proposal in his primary work *The weakness of God* (2006) is for a God without sovereignty who is a weak force. The ‘theo-poetics’ of Kearney, as expressed in works such as *The God who may be* (2001) and *Anatheism* (2010), contracts all the major motifs of this discourse in his own imaginative proposal. There is an emphatic departure from the Omni-God of theodicy and of metaphysical causality, and an intentional retrieval of the perspectives of promise and futurity. His ‘God after God’ calls for acts of charity, in everyday life and in hospitable encounters with the ‘least of these’. The *combination of concerns* in this discourse – critique of ontotheology, gift and saturation, as well as alterity and hospitality – intimates a serious challenge and encouragement to traditional Systematic Theology to re-think God in a post-metaphysical manner.<sup>60</sup>

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57 For an informed account that furnishes the philosophical background as well as excellent descriptions of the proposals by the main participants, see Gschwandtner (2013).

58 See Caputo & Scanlon (1999 & 2007) and Caputo, Dooley & Scanlon (2001).

59 See Manoussakis (2006:xvi).

60 For some interactions, see Henriksen (2010), Benjamins (2015) and, by South African scholars, Steenkamp (2017), Verhoef (2017), and Pretorius (2018).



#### 4.5.3 The 'turn to spirituality'

The 'turn to spirituality' in the twentieth century and the decline of conventional denominational religiosity did not escape the radar of Systematic Theology, and intentional interactions with especially *spirituality* and *mysticism* are found. I will attend to the work of two prominent systematic theologians who also happen to be outstanding God-thinkers.

David Tracy is one of the truly noteworthy God-thinkers in contemporary theology. His work displays a firm grasp of the history of doctrine and of the unique contours of the present time. Overcoming the separation of theology and spirituality forms a main orientation in his mature theology. For Tracy (1994:37), the history of theology is the history of the ever-shifting relationship between the reality of God and that reality as understood from within a specific *logos*, that is, a horizon of intelligibility. He feels inclined towards postmodernity, as it resists the totalising system of modernity and attends to the face of the other (Tracy 2002:27). Although he expresses appreciation for the emphasis on relationality in recent theology, he is worried that God may become yet again a conceptual prisoner of this system of thinking (1994:42). His preferable category for speaking about God is the *Impossible*, as it allows a naming of God in terms of *incomprehensibility* and *hiddenness* (Tracy 2011:124). The two theologians epitomizing these notions in history are Dionysios and Luther. Tracy's central concern is to resist the eclipse of *theos* by the modern *logos* for intelligibility. He is seeking 'a return of God', a 'radical interruption' (Tracy 1994:42), 'to let God be God again' (:44). This he finds in the postmodern form of the Impossible, 'the reality of God as the incomprehensible, hidden and excessively loving one' (Tracy 2011:127). Two kinds of experiences are crucial for him: the 'void' – experiences of extreme suffering, injustice, terror, despair and alienation – and the 'open' – experiences of awe, wonder and sheer giftedness (Tracy 2002:28). Approaching God involves more than predication, but also *praise and prayer*. These he encounters in different fragments, in a variety of forms such as the lament, apocalyptic, and apophatic. He has particular openness to the Eastern Orthodox tradition and its attempt to combine *apophaticism* and Trinity (Tracy 2000:78) and he wants to 'wonder again at the overwhelming mystery of God' (Tracy 1994:46).

The oeuvre of Sarah Coakley represents one of the most exciting and versatile projects under way in Systematic Theology at present. Her insistence on *prayer* as central to the Trinity warrants close reading. Integrating Patristic Theology, feminist theory, mysticism, iconography, and contemporary Systematic Theology, she remarkably pursues

interdisciplinary theology with the label *théologie totale*. Her book – *God, sexuality, and the self (an essay ‘on the Trinity’)* (2013) – together with the earlier mentioned five-volume work by Kärkkäinen – represents the dynamic nature and direction of current Systematic Theology. She connects the revival of Trinitarian thought to the renewal of the commitment to apophatic prayer. For her, and she is emphatic about this, prayer-practice is inherently Trinitarian. A detailed interpretation of Romans 8 allows her to develop a prayer-based model of the Trinity, starting with the Holy Spirit (2013:111–115). The combination of Trinity and prayer unavoidably confront a range of issues about sexuality. Her argument should be followed, in this instance: this engagement arises from the entanglement of human sexual desire and the desire for God. A new vision of *divine desire* (that is, a Trinitarian one) may provide the governing framework for a new approach to human sexuality.<sup>61</sup> She constructs nothing less than a ‘Trinitarian ontology of desire’ (2013:6). A number of crucial insights should be registered: Trinity and prayer have social and even cosmic significance (2013:114), and the focus on prayer is her answer to the danger of onto-theology (2013:42–47), as it resists turning God into a controllable object of knowledge.

## 5. Gathering fragments – a new grammar for speaking God?

To end this overview of main developments in Systematic Theology on God, some concluding comments may be productive.

### 5.1 Plurality of discourses

The plurality of discourses and perspectives should in no way be considered a dilemma to overcome. The *nature of the divine pluralizes* human naming and resists domestication by simplistic and stable speaking. Kaleidoscopic descriptions convey much more a sense of authenticity as God stimulates rather than stifles the human imagination.

### 5.2 Acknowledgement of shifts in the doctrine of God

That *radical shifts* have taken place in the doctrine of God should be acknowledged. I refrain from drawing a new ‘profile’ of God, which would be an expression of a totalising mentality. However, thinking about God reflects the reality of deep global, social and cultural changes, and of reaction to classical theism. There are new trends, new directions and new sensibilities which are widely acknowledged. Saying this, I do not pretend that consensus is inherent in the practice of doing Systematic Theology.

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61 Coakley (1998) succinctly discusses the main contours of her theology of Trinity, prayer and sexuality.

### 5.3 Profile or image of God

The profile or image of God, which emerges in the theology of serious God-thinkers, is the configuration of various elements. The transformation has occurred at the social and intellectual *condition of production*. An *expansion* has taken place – of geography, of thought categories, of hermeneutical paradigms, of experiences, of ethical concerns, and of dialogues with other disciplines. Much of this has happened intentionally, with a heightened awareness of the dynamics of theological construction.

### 5.4 Centripetal force – figure of Jesus

Yet, despite the bewildering pluralization, the entire endeavour has not degenerated in an anarchical speaking, because there remains a *centripetal force* in Christian Systematic Theology – reference to the historical *figure of Jesus*. This central orientation, especially on the cross, renders the many sounds into a magnificent symphony. The re-appreciation of the Trinitarian confession, and the employment of a new – relational – ontology is a new translation of a persistent narrative of a ‘God who is for us’.

### 5.5 Contribution of developments since Barth

The direct consequence of this ‘rediscovery’ of the Trinity – the ‘*revisioning of the attribute tradition*’ – could arguably be the outstanding contribution of the developments since Barth. The material result of an expansive formal condition is to be found precisely here. Thinking the divine Trinitarian disrupts conventional theistic speaking. Resistance to an onto-theological logic – that God is another being in the hierarchy of being – directed theologians back to narratives of interpersonal encounters in the Bible, to the cruciform nature of the Christian grammar, and to the fundamental eschatological orientation of the Christian faith. If one could dare to speak about ‘progress’ in theology, it should be located here.

### 5.6 Preference for contemporary theologians speaking to God

The preference of contemporary theologians to speak the Christian God in terms of *relationality, vulnerability, futurity, gift and hospitality* may reflect a sensitivity to listening more carefully to biblical witnesses and to discern more responsibly the heartbeat of our times.

### 5.7 Effect of intuitions and conviction of theologians

The intuitions and conviction of theologians led to *two radicalizations*: the *immanence* and the *transcendence* of God. God cannot be thought as outside

of history or of cosmic processes; God is more intimately involved than we could grasp; yet, God is also more transcendent, more hidden than we could imagine. This dialectic of solidarity and of distance belongs to the fabric of the Christian identification of God.

#### 5.8 Speaking to God, naming God is an intrinsic ethical practice

Speaking to God, naming God is an intrinsic *ethical practice* – it has unfathomable existential, social and planetary ramifications. God-talk matters in a time of eco-recklessness, economic disparity, human displacement, multiple violence, and alienation. The choice of metaphors has political implications. The grammar of our theologies may embody an ethic of social responsibility.

#### 5.9 Entanglement between God-construction and self-construction

The entanglement between God-construction and *self-construction* should not be missed. Far from being a mere human projection, the Christian Trinitarian naming is a statement of the ultimate mystery of the world. Naming God in categories intelligible to our time –relationality, vulnerability, futurity, gift, and hospitality – returns as imperative to us: to ‘echo’ something of those divine qualities as image-bearers. A vision of God and a vision of life go together.

#### 5.10 Speaking to God is a journey of receptive listening

The ‘new’ grammar may also start suffering from aging and becoming a mere naming of the ‘Ancient of Days’. Speaking to God is a *journey* of receptive listening to the tradition, of responsible discerning the signs of the times, and of creative imagining. This is the joy of doing Systematic Theology in the face of Loving Mystery.

# Only a Fully Trinitarian Theology will do, but where can that be Found?

Ernst M Conradie

## 1. Introduction

In a famous essay on '*The necessity of a trinitarian theology*', Arnold van Ruler (1989:1) observes that '[s]imply recognizing the necessity of a trinitarian theology does not mean that one succeeds in the project'. He adds that he has not found such a theology in the entire Christian theological tradition, He further suggests that Calvin approached that ideal most closely, and admits that he is not able to offer anything approximating that. This comment may sound odd given the renaissance of trinitarian theology in the last century and the astonishing flourishing of books on the doctrine of the trinity over the last three decades. Yet, a 'fully trinitarian' theology remains more elusive than a mere affirmation of its significance may suggest. Why is this the case?

The key does not necessarily lie in revisiting classic trinitarian distinctions or in delving into a form of inner-trinitarian mysticism based on the 'social analogy'. The trinity does govern the very core of the Christian confession and forms its doxological conclusion – rather than a logical point of departure for an entire theological system. Yet such a doxological conclusion is undermined by questions that emerge regarding the relationship between the work of the Father, Son and Spirit. Whatever position one may take on the relationship between the economic and immanent trinity, it should be clear that a fully trinitarian theology cannot be presented only on the basis of inner-trinitarian relationships without clarity on the work of the Father, Son and Spirit in relation to each other. As I will argue below, I still do not see such clarity emerging. A fully trinitarian theology may therefore be as elusive as before the renaissance of trinitarian theology over the last three decades.

2. The first and the second articles: Doing justice to creation and salvation

Both creation and salvation are the work of the triune God. One can speak about these themes only in a trinitarian way. However, merely offering three perspectives rather than one is not sufficient. If the relationship is understood in a way that undermines either the one or the other, that reveals an inadequate understanding of the trinity. Various issues where justice has to be done to both creation and salvation therefore offer test cases for a 'fully trinitarian' theology. It is far more difficult to do justice to both creation and salvation than it may appear at first sight. Typically, the one is subsumed under the other or under a third category. The most acute formulation of the issue at stake is perhaps by Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2000:75): 'Is the God of our redemption the same God of our creation?' This question is born from the African quest for identity. What is the continuity between a pre-Christian African notion of the creator God and the Christian message of redemption that took root in Africa following the work of Western missionaries? Since the earliest Bible translators have used the same word and name for the God of our ancestors and for the God of Christian proclamation, there appears to be some continuity, but given the legacy of colonialism, there may certainly also be deep tensions in this regard.

On this basis one may argue that the relationship between creation and salvation underlies much of contemporary African theology, especially theologies based on notions of indigenisation and inculturation, even though this is seldom articulated as such. This is closely related to discourse on 'the gospel and our culture'. Whenever there is a too close identification of Christianity with a particular culture (Niebuhr's 'the Christ of culture'), this prompts a prophetic critique of culture. Such a critique is entirely appropriate as Christian discourse on consumerism illustrates (see Conradie 2009). However, in contexts of cultural, ethnic and linguistic marginalisation and oppression there is a need to affirm not only human dignity but also the authenticity of cultural expressions. There comes a time when black theologians need to insist that 'Black is beautiful'. Indeed, theological reflection on 'black liberation' requires justice to both creation and salvation. Of course, such an affirmation of culture may well be dangerous – as the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in response to British imperialism and cultural marginalisation illustrates.

One may argue that the relationship between creation and salvation was the underlying issue at stake in South African debates on apartheid theology. Apartheid theology was essentially a theology of creation based on the 'orders of creation'. It maintained that differences of race

and ethnicity were part of the created order and had to be maintained, if necessary through law and order. Salvation was thus understood as separation, keeping racial groups apart, for the sake of all concerned. In response, most notably in the Belhar confession, it was maintained that the theological legitimation of apartheid undermined the message and ministry of reconciliation in Jesus Christ and assumed the irreconcilability of people – different races are so different that the best option is to keep them apart. The struggle against apartheid theology therefore rightly focused on soteriology and ecclesiology, but in reformed circles hardly addressed issues in creation theology. Elsewhere apartheid was described as an anthropological heresy (Maimela 1983) on the basis of a critique of racism, a liberal notion of the inherent goodness of humanity, African cultural notions of *ubuntu* and Desmond Tutu's notion of being members of the family, the rainbow people of God (2005). It is at least clear that any evading of the doctrine of creation will necessarily undermine the plausibility of the message of salvation. If the relationship between God and the world is not addressed, it is scarcely possible to explain how God can save the world.

There are several other burning issues on the agenda of churches and theological reflection, in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, where clarity on the relationship between salvation and creation as *creatura* is also required.

How is the Christian faith related to scientific theories, for example quantum cosmology and biological evolution? Some would tend to offer either a theological legitimation or a theological repudiation of such theories. Others would suggest that 'faith has nothing to do with science'. The two categories operate at different levels and should not be confused. What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens? The church with the academy? Is that an adequate theological response though?

How should medical evidence around the reversibility (or not) of a homosexual orientation be employed in theological reflection? Often such evidence seems to be decisive in forming a theological position. Is that appropriate in terms of a theological methodology? However, an approach where such evidence is not taken into account at all would be equally problematic.

Many have observed that the stigmatisation of HIV/AIDS forms part of the problem. Accordingly, AIDS cannot be regarded as God's punishment for human sin, more specifically for sexual promiscuity. In response, many have treated the spread of HIV merely in medical, sociological and psychological terms, Those infected or affected by the virus are regarded as victims, even as purely 'innocent' victims. They are treated as patients

who suffer from the disease. However, given the associated issues around faithfulness to one's partner, one can scarcely argue that the spread of the disease has nothing to do with human sin. How, then, is the Christian message of sin and salvation related to the medical issues? Moreover, why are there such viruses in God's good creation?

What is the place of the church amidst other groups in civil society? How should its uniqueness as an 'eschatological community' be understood? Is the church just another non-governmental organisation? Is the church a voluntary association, a club or a civil organisation? What is the relationship between church law and civil law? How should the church (at different levels) engage with the state, political parties and policy making?

How should the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions be understood? Can Christianity be regarded as one particular form of religion alongside others? Would any such generic term not undermine the claims to universality of Christian faith? Does God have indeed many names? Alternatively, how should the continuity between Christianity and Judaism and between Judaism and earlier religious traditions be understood? What do the gods of Egypt and the God of the Bible have in common? Where do our notions of God and of transcendence come from in the first place? How is that related to the common human sense of wonder?

In terms of everyday life, Christians have to explain to themselves how being Christian is related to being human. How is Sunday related to the rest of the week? What is the relationship between Christian faith and the world of work, culture, science and art? What difference does being a Christian make in coping with the demands of life, with the production and consumption of food, with human sexuality, with health and sickness, with capability and disability, with generation and degeneration? What about death? Is death natural? Is that part of God's good creation too?

In ecclesial praxis the basic questions of a theological hermeneutics cannot be avoided. What is the relationship between human words and God's Word? How can our human words and images be used to express something about God's identity and character?

What is the difference between Christian and secular ethics? What role should social analysis play in a contextual hermeneutics? What 'point of contact' may be found for education, pastoral care, apologetics and mission? How can the dominant vocabularies of a particular culture be used to express the gospel without distorting it by translating the gospel into something that it is not, for example by 'selling' it as a 'product' on the market of religious ideas?



In each of these cases it is not self-evident why and how the world as we know it (or don't know it) can be described as God's own creation (*creatura*). The problem is that the world as we know it is always already perceived to be the product of God's work of creation, of the legacy of human sin and of God's work of providence and salvation. This requires considerable discernment. To return to the example of homosexuality: is being gay part of God's good creation? Or the result of fallenness? Is being gay good, but being straight better? Does one have to be 'saved', or healed, or even exorcised from being gay? Or will one remain gay also in the eschatological consummation since God declared that to be good too? Or does sexual orientation no longer matter? Is sexuality abolished in the eschaton? Do we then have to be saved from our sexuality? These questions cannot be answered on the basis of soteriology or creation theology alone.

Questions around creation and salvation are perhaps expressed most acutely whenever the theodicy problem is raised. This is indeed the experiential heart of discourse on creation and salvation. Inversely, the theodicy problem can be addressed only on the basis of an adequate understanding of the relationship between creation (God as the omnipotent Creator) and salvation (God as the loving Saviour). Indeed, without reflection on the relationship between creation (*creatio*) and salvation and on the question as to what creation (*creatura*) is to be saved from, discourse on the theodicy problem would all too easily take a theological short-cut by failing to address the origins of evil (especially sin) and the consequences of sin (evil).

The examples above illustrate the social and pastoral significance of discourse on creation and salvation, the work of the Father and the work of the Son. They do not as yet indicate the underlying theological difficulties. As I have explored this in far more depth elsewhere (Conradie 2013:1–50), I will only hint at these problems here through a series of questions in bullet form:

- How is God-talk possible in the first place?
- What enables us to describe the world as we know it as God's own beloved creation?

Some may argue that this is only possible on the basis of experiences of or witnesses to God's salvation, but that claim poses similar problems:

- How can experiences of healing, reconciliation, justice or peace be ascribed to God's work?
- What theory of divine action is assumed in this regard?

Many would argue that salvation should be understood as the salvation of God's creation (*creatura*) and not as salvation *from* creation. But what does that actually mean on an evolving planet in an expanding universe? It can all too easily be reduced to the salvation of human beings or human culture (or the lifestyles of the consumer class) from the impact of anthropogenic ecological destruction. Moreover, is the planet to be saved only from human sin or also from what is called 'natural suffering'? If the former, can death still be regarded as the result of human sin only? If the latter, how can a notion of salvation as elevation from that which is natural, material, bodily and earthly be avoided? Sharply formulated: Is the work of Christ to improve on the inadequate work of the Father?

If creation is understood as *creatio*, the question shifts to the relationship between God's acts of creation (in the beginning?) and God's acts of salvation. One may then portray God's acts of creation as salvific, establishing order amidst chaos (Gen 1), while God's acts of salvation may be portrayed as creative. However, a different set of problems emerges in order to prevent either compartmentalising or fusion of these categories. Compartmentalising of these two categories typically leads to a form of neo-Calvinist apartheid theology, where salvation can be understood only as the restoration of the order assumed to be established through God's work of creation. Creation becomes normative for salvation. The dangers of fusion are equally pervasive if less well understood. If the act of creation is itself salvific, what is it that salvation is from? Inversely, if salvation is understood as creative, where does such creativity come from? What theory of divine action is involved, and how is that shaped by an understanding of God as Creator?

A somewhat different set of issues emerge when the focus shifts from God's work of creation, salvation and consummation to reflection on God's identity. Here the question is how the relationship between the Christian confession of faith in God as Creator and as Saviour (the first and the second articles of the Christian creed) may be understood. One may argue that it is impossible to do justice to both creation (the work of God the Father/Mother) and salvation (the work of Jesus Christ) without the work of the Holy Spirit (re-creation, comfort, sanctification). However, to avoid distortions in understanding the relationships between the work of three persons in the trinity is far more easily said than done.

The underlying problem may also be clarified when the different ways of constructing the plot of God's work of creation, salvation and consummation are considered. I see only the following four possibilities and all of them are deeply problematic: the (neo-Calvinist) *restoration* of creation (where evolution and natural evil are underplayed); or the

(Roman-Catholic) *elevation* of human nature in terms of transfiguration or recapitulation (or liberal notions of education and development); or the (Anabaptist) *replacement* of nature with God's new creation (where the problems posed by evolution through natural election and natural evil are nowadays highlighted); or a (secularist) recycling of that which is natural (where nature will inevitably save itself without much of a role for God). Alternatives to these options do not seem to be forthcoming.

The underlying difficulties may also be illustrated by the criticisms of 'Christomonism' and a 'binitarian' theology raised against Karl Barth who was responsible for the renaissance of trinitarian theology in the 20th century. Regin Prenter (1946) accused Barth of 'creation docetism', while Gustaf Wingren went so far as to suggest that Barth influenced many to regard the first article of the Christian creed as a Nazi principle (see Vander Goot 1981:145). Although these criticisms may well be refuted through Barthian scholarship, they do suggest that a trinitarian theology needs to go beyond a mere affirmation of relatedness to explore the nature of the relationship in all its complexity.

In a section of his meditations on the Apostolicum, Van Ruler comments on the dramatic significance of the word 'and' between the first and the second articles of the creed. He says:

'The most important aspect of the word 'and' still lies elsewhere. It links two aspects with each other and distinguishes them also. On the one side stands the confession of God as Creator. This expresses the awesome mystery of being: we experience being as creation and therefore as gift. On the other side stands the confession of God as Saviour. This expresses the almost equally awesome mystery of salvation (*heil*): we experience ourselves not as lost in the abyss of meaninglessness or guilt, but as kept unto eternal life. ... These are two enormous themes: the theme of being and of salvation. The confession links and distinguishes these two themes in a carefree (*argeloze*) way through the simple word 'and'. The theme of being comes first, salvation follows upon that. That we are is more fundamental and deeper than that we are saved. Therefore, this particular sequence exists. However, we should not replace this sequence with a contrast. Being and salvation are linked with each other through the word 'and'. Salvation means that being is saved from decay (*verderf*) and can be again. Creation is the primary matter. It is kept for all eternity. That is salvation' (Van Ruler, *Ik Geloof*, no date:46, my translation).

To summarise: if justice is not so easily done to both God's work of creation and salvation (and this seems to be an almost insurmountable problem), an affirmation of the intimate relationship between Father and Son remains all too easy and cheap.

### 3. The second and the third articles: doing justice to Christ and the Spirit

While the *filioque* controversy may be regarded as a highly technical theological dispute (see especially Oberdorfer 2001), the underlying issue of the relationship between the Christ and the Holy Spirit is of immense pastoral significance. One may argue that it continues to divide Christianity in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. Such ecumenical conflict provides another test case for a 'fully trinitarian' theology.

Mainline and evangelical churches tend to maintain a strong Christological and ecclesiological emphasis. The Spirit completes the work of Christ. The Spirit works through the body of Christ (the church), the various offices of and the structures of governances in the church, the ministry of the sacraments (the body and blood of Christ) and especially the apostolic witnesses to Christ (the Bible). The clarity of the work of the Spirit is emphasised on the basis of these functions. The Spirit works in the state and in civil society but only through the ministries of the church in the world. At best, the movement of the Spirit can be discerned through an exegesis of the letter of the biblical texts and through processes of spiritual formation and higher education. At worst, the movement of the Spirit is controlled on the basis of ecclesiastical authority, for example in gate-keeping around access to the sacraments, the baptism of children of secular parents, church discipline against those who are baptised again as adults, exclusion to the holy communion on the basis of race, class or sexual orientation, the right to a church-based marriage and funeral, and so forth. According to critics, such control of the movement of the Spirit can lead only to intellectualism and spiritual aridness.

By contrast, the freedom of the Spirit to 'blow wherever it wants to' is emphasised in a variety of other Christian movements (see the essays in *Scriptura* Volume 79 – Conradie 2002). These movements include, to a lesser or a greater extent, a variety of indigenous theologies ('God's Spirit was here in South Africa before the message about Jesus Christ arrived'), Pentecostal theologies, including African Pentecostalism (the free gifts of the Spirit), liberation theologies (the political work of the Spirit outside the church), feminist theologies (the feminine face of the Spirit as a counter to a male Christ), religious pluralism (the universality of the Spirit is preferred to the exclusiveness of Christ) and perhaps also

ecological theologies (the cosmic scope of the Spirit's presence). Critics from mainline churches recognise the attractions of these movements, envy the numerical growth of new Pentecostal churches, but also warn about the need to discern the spirits. Not every Spirit may be called the Spirit of Christ. Thus mutual suspicions remain rife. One example of this tension is the differences in ecumenical theology between those who adopt a Christological orientation (e.g. Geoffrey Wainwright) and those who call for a pneumatological reorientation in the name of a fully trinitarian approach (for example, Konrad Raiser). The spread of Orthodox Christianity in South Africa (especially in its Coptic and Ethiopian forms) may offer a distinct and perhaps illuminating position within this tension.

Theologically, this requires much deeper reflection on the relationship between the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. One may use the work of Christ as a point of departure to reflect on the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit. For me, Arnold van Ruler's remarkable essay (1989:27–47) on several significant structural differences between Christology and pneumatology points in the appropriate direction. One may also regard the life and work of Jesus Christ as one manifestation of the movement of God's Spirit. For me, Michael Welker's portrayal (1994) of the emerging clarity in the biblical roots of Christianity on the movement of God's Spirit remains extremely helpful. Klaus Nürnberger's very different account (2002) of the interpretation of the work of the Spirit completes the story regarding the subsequent history of Christianity, but in my view also illustrates how difficult a fully trinitarian theology may be, given the many connotations attached to 'spirit' in philosophy and theology alike.

#### 4. The first and the third articles: doing justice to the universal and the particular

The relationship between God the Father / Mother and the Holy Spirit poses another test case for a fully trinitarian theology. Here a different set of issues emerges. Perhaps this becomes most evident in Christian responses to religious diversity. This forms a test case for an affirmation of the doctrine of the trinity in ecclesial praxis, also and especially in the African context. For many African Christians, the only way to engage with people of other faiths is to acknowledge that 'God has many names' and that knowing God as the Father of Jesus Christ is only one such name for the Supreme Being. Thus faith in the triune God is reduced to faith in God the Father on the basis of some form of subordinationism, the link between the immanent trinity and the economic trinity is discarded, and God's revelation is clouded. The God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is different from the actual One behind the mask in the sense that the Supreme Being

cannot be immediately named as the Father of Jesus Christ. Ironically, the Spirit (or a vague sense of spirituality) provides the generic category to place different notions of the transcendent, of Ultimate Mystery alongside each other, thus compromising their ultimacy. In other words, there are many claims to discern the movement of the Spirit in the context of the African Spirit world. However, it is not all that clear if and when this Spirit proceeds from the Father, at least not the Father of Jesus Christ.

While no trinitarian theologian would put the matter in such crude terms, the challenges for ecclesial praxis remain undeniable in a world characterised by the peaceful co-existence of different religious traditions, if not by a 'clash of civilisations' and religious-infused conflict (for example in Nigeria or the Sudan). How could faith in the triune God plausibly guide Christians in such a context? How can the trinitarian mystery be protected doxologically? Only a fully trinitarian theology will do, but where can such a trinitarian theology be found?

## 5. Conclusion

The argument of this contribution has been that a 'fully trinitarian' theology cannot emerge only on the basis of an inner-trinitarian exploration of the social analogy or the psychological analogy. The issues identified in the three sections above provide test cases for a trinitarian theology and set an agenda in this regard. They serve as a protocol against trinitarian short cuts. Each of these issues can be addressed only in a trinitarian way. However, this does not merely imply that three different perspectives (rather than one) need to be offered on each of these issues. This form of 'Trinitarian spread' (Noordmans) is in my view entirely appropriate and adds a certain richness to the discussion of any theological, ethical or contextual topic. However, this would not suffice. Instead, the question is whether justice can be done to the work of Father, Son and Spirit. Can the tensions be maintained and not be resolved prematurely? As the discussion above illustrates, all too often the tension is collapsed by subsuming one category under another with far-reaching pastoral implications. This can only undermine the plausibility of a Trinitarian theology. It remains elusive, something like a theological vision that cannot be attained easily.

In the interim an affirmation of trinitarian theology remains important. As Herman Bavinck recognised, this affirmation has to focus on the work and not only the identity of the triune God. He formulated this in terms of the tension between creation and re-creation: The God of creation and of the Old Testament is not lower than the God of re-creation, than the Father of Christ, than the God of the new covenant. Christ, the mediator of the new covenant, is also he by whom God created

all things. And the Holy Spirit who is the author of regeneration and sanctification is the same as he who in the beginning hovered over the waters and adorned the heavens. Creation and re-creation can therefore not be contrasted in terms of being lower and higher. They are both good and pure – splendid works of the one Triune God (Bavinck 2008:436). Only on this basis can one entertain the beauty of an inner-trinitarian perichoresis (literary: dancing around) in which we as human beings and the whole earth community may participate. Arnold van Ruler (1989:173) captures this in the image of a *reidans* where the focus is on the relation between God's actions: 'Historical reality is fully a divine reality, a dance in round (*reidans*) of God's deeds. God's deeds are not yet complete, the Lord God is not yet finished with his world or with his children. All that we as human beings can do is to try with breathless attention to follow God in his journey through time.' God is asking us this question: 'May I dance with you?' The core of our human existence lies in our willingness to entertain this question (see, for example, Van Ruler 2009:170).





# 4

## The Living God

Brian Gaybba

### 1. The Living God

The doctrine of the Trinity, which puts the Christian view of God in a brief formula, can lay claim to being the most important of all Christian beliefs. This chapter will attempt to make clear why this is so.

The chapter has two main parts. The first sketches the historical development of the doctrine and provides a brief outline of it in its classic form. The second explains part of the relevance of the doctrine to Christian belief and practice.

### 2. The history of the doctrine

Scripture does not talk about three persons in one God. But it does talk about Father, Son and Spirit in such a way that the development of some sort of trinitarian view of God was inevitable. By a 'trinitarian view of God' I mean a way of thinking that regards not only the Father but also the Son and the Spirit as being in some way or other part of the divine side of things and as having distinct roles to play in humanity's creation and salvation. In this section I will trace the broad outlines of that development, from its emergence in apostolic times to its consolidation in a fifth-century creed.

It is especially in those parts of the New Testament that speak about the risen Lord that we see a trinitarian view of God developing. Let me mention just some of the texts illustrating this.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17, written barely twenty years after Jesus' death, we find Paul associating all three with the divine work of our salvation. A few years later we find in Galatians 4:6 an even more developed trinitarian mentality. Here we see all three people helping to share in the Son's relationship with the Father. Moreover, the Spirit – God's Spirit – is clearly described as Jesus' Spirit. This is a further way of associating Jesus with the divine. But it also reinforces the idea that there is a distinction between the Spirit and God (that is, between the Spirit and the Father) that was not really envisaged in Israelite religion as described in the Hebrew Bible.

Moving on to a slighter later period, we find in Ephesians 4:3–6 a text that stresses their contribution to the church's unity and therefore their own unity with each other, an idea that surfaces again in 1 Corinthians 12:4–6. Further examples of 'trinitarian' texts can be found in 2 Corinthians 1:21–22, 3:3 and 13:14. The last is particularly interesting because it is evidence of the three coming to be named together in liturgical formulae that will be used over and over again.

The above texts (and others such as 1 Peter 1:2, Jude 20:21, Revelation 1:4–5 and Hebrews 6:4) all come from sources that concentrate on the life of the infant church after Pentecost. However, examples can also be taken from the gospels. Jesus' baptism, clearly a key revelatory event for the early Christians, is one such example (see Matthew 3:13–17 and parallel texts). Let me close this section by referring to two others.

The first is from the gospel of John, 15:26–16:15, where Jesus speaks of his relationship to the Father and to the Spirit. It is a text that not only underscores the close unity Jesus has with the Father, but also elucidates the respective relationships between all three. The Father is the source of all, the One who sends not only the Spirit but also the Son. The Father gives all he has to the Son, including the Spirit. The Son therefore can also send the Spirit and does so. Moreover, since whatever the Father has belongs to the Son, whatever the Spirit brings is derived from the Son.

The second text is from Matthew's gospel – 28:19 – and is, by common consent, the high point of the development of a trinitarian mentality in apostolic times. It is also a formula that has entered into the church's baptismal liturgy. In this text, written probably as late as AD 85, the three are named alongside each other as though all were equal, the only differentiation being their ordering.

In early post-apostolic times the custom continues of associating Father, Son and Spirit with each other in the way we have just seen. Barely fifty years after the end of the apostolic period (c. 155) we can see the outlines of a formula developing that will become customary in the church: 'to the Father ... through the Son ... and the Holy Spirit' (see, for example, Justin Martyr's *Apology I*, 65). And only twenty years later (c. 180), we find Theophilus of Antioch describing the three as a 'triad', that is to say a 'threesome'. The term 'triad' did not enter into Western theological thought. But a similar term coined about sixty years later by the African scholar Tertullian did – 'Trinity'.

Tertullian also coined the phrase 'three persons in one substance', to bring out the fact that the distinction of persons did not imply dividing the divine substance between them. God was one in substance but three in the way in which that substance was shared. About a century

later, theologians from the East came up with a similar formula: 'three hypostases in one substance'. It was coined by a group of theologians known as the Cappadocians, since they were all born in Cappadocia. The basic idea behind both formulae was that the one, undivided Godhead was shared in three different ways.

In the fifth century in the West, a creed was composed that spelt out all the implications of the formula. It also highlighted the core Christian beliefs that necessitated some such formula: Father, Son and Spirit are distinct realities and each fully God. Nevertheless, there is only one God. The creed is known as the *Quicumque*, after its opening word, and also as the Athanasian Creed, after Athanasius, who was at one time wrongly believed to have been its author.

It should be clear by now that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity has its roots in Scripture and is not, as some have tried to argue, derived from pagan polytheistic or philosophical ideas. However, philosophical ideas provided early Christian thinkers with tools for trying to understand how a single divine substance could be shared by three without being divided. We turn, then, to some of those ideas and the models built with them.

The Apologists tried to use Stoic ideas about *logos* to understand the relationship between Jesus and the Father, especially to explain how they could be part of one undivided divinity and yet distinct from each other. *Logos* means 'reason' or 'word'. The Stoics distinguished between the 'immanent *logos*' and the 'expressed *logos*'. The former is reason in an inactivated state, while the latter is its activated expression. Applied to God, the divine *logos* was merely immanent within the Godhead until the moment of creation, when it became activated, a *logos* expressed in the order and harmony in the world.

Prior to creation, the Apologists argued, the Son was only immanent – that is, not clearly formed – within the Godhead. With creation, however, the Son sprang forth within the divinity as an idea springs forth within our minds, thereby becoming the 'expressed *logos*'. There were now two clearly distinct realities within God: the thinker (the Father) and the expressed thought (the Son).

As can be seen, the basic idea here is to compare the Son to an idea springing forth from the mind of God. This way of picturing the relationship between Father and Son became part of classic Western trinitarian theology, as a result especially of Augustine's 'psychological model'. It was an attractive model precisely because Scripture itself refers to the Son as the *logos* or 'word' of God, with God from the beginning, expressing the mind of God perfectly (John 1:1–14). The Apologists' version of it had for many the drawback that it seemed to deny the eternity

of the Son's existence – since the Son springs forth clearly only at creation. But the model itself was to remain. As regards the Spirit, this was seen as some sort of effluence flowing from God. However, the Apologists had no intellectual model within which to place the Spirit.

Later in the same century we find Irenaeus of Lyons extending the Apologists' model to the emergence of the Spirit too. He does so by distinguishing within God the capacity for reason (God's latent Word) and the capacity for spiritual activity (God's latent Wisdom). At the moment of creation and redemption these latent capacities are activated, and in their activated, expressed form are known as the Son and the Spirit respectively. Thus activated, they can be compared to 'hands' used by the Father for our creation and redemption.

Writing in the third century, Tertullian also used the Stoic idea of the emergence of the *logos* from an immanent to an expressed state in order to explain how the Son could be both divine and yet distinct from the Father. However, he also used other models or images, all of which bring out a further point, namely the relationship between Son and Spirit. For he uses images that evoke the idea of a process beginning with the Father, moving through the Son and ending up in the Holy Spirit: a fruit derived from a shoot which in turn grows from the root; a channel of water drawn from a river whose source is a spring; a point of light at the end of a beam that originates in the sun.

Origen lived at the same time as Tertullian but was an Eastern thinker. The model used by him was drawn from the emerging Neoplatonic philosophy of the time. The overarching idea is that godness has a built-in drive to share itself. This impulse to share moves the original, undifferentiated, divine One to produce Mind. From Mind there emerges Soul. Soul has two levels, a higher and a lower level. From the latter, matter is produced. Origen fitted his trinitarian thought into this scheme. The Father is identified with the One. To produce the world, he first produces Mind, the Son. And just as Soul flows from Mind, so too the Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son – a point Tertullian made in another way.

As we saw, the Cappadocians bequeathed to the East the formula 'three hypostases in one substance'. Moreover, they distinguished between them as follows: a *hypostasis* is a particular way in which a substance exists. The difference between the two is therefore the difference between the particular (*hypostasis*) and the general (substance). Father, Son and Spirit are portrayed as three particular ways in which one and the same divine substance exist. To illustrate the difference between the general and the particular, Basil of Caesarea appealed to the example of humanity shared by several individuals. We all share fully in the substance known

as 'humanity', but we are all different realisations of it. We are all human beings. But we are all different ways of being human.

Of course, this is only an analogy. If it were applied to God too literally, one would end up with three gods. But it does illustrate the basic point the Fathers were trying to make, namely that one and the same divine substance can have three different and quite distinct (though not separate) ways of existing simultaneously. To make the same point more crudely: the one undivided Godhead exists simultaneously in three different 'shapes' – as Father, Son and Spirit.

The Cappadocian model, therefore, is of a single substance having three different and yet simultaneous ways of existing. What differentiates each way from the others is either the fact that it is the original, underived way (the Father) or it is one of the two ways in which it is derived from that original position (Son and Spirit). The more accurate model, then, is as follows: a single undivided substance, existing simultaneously in three different ways, each of which is unceasingly flowing either into or out of the others. The flow is known as the divine *perichoresis* or *circumincessio*.

In trying to deepen his understanding of the Trinity, Augustine took as his starting point the fact that, according to the Scriptures, humanity has been made in God's image and likeness. The best place to look for a model or image of the Trinity, therefore, is within ourselves, at our spiritual natures. In pursuing this line of thought, he developed several 'psychological models' (as they came to be called) of the Trinity. The main ones all revolve around the capacity of the human mind to know and love.

The aspects of the mind that Augustine eventually singled out were the following: its ability to be aware of itself (which he called 'memory'), to understand itself (which he called 'understanding'), and to love itself ('love'). Here, we have an undivided spiritual reality (the human mind) that can exist in three distinct but related forms: self-awareness, self-understanding and self-love. This provides us with a model of a God whose self-awareness (Father) giving rise to self-understanding (Son) is completed in an act of self-love (Holy Spirit).

The earliest models began by focusing on the divine mind. Augustine balanced this out by bringing in the divine capacity to love. In the twelfth century we see Richard of St Victor moving to the other extreme and focusing exclusively on love. In doing so, he gave rise to what has been called the 'family model' of the Trinity, because it pictures the love of two persons for each other producing a third, almost as an offspring.

Richard's starting point is the idea that God will automatically love in the fullest possible way. God's initial drive to love results in the following structure within the Godhead: a love that is given freely ('gratuitous love')

and a love that is received ('indebted love'). However, love shared only by two is not yet perfect, since perfect love leads lovers to turn away from each other so as to share their love with a third. Hence gratuitous and indebted love – Father and Son – produce what Richard calls a 'co-beloved'. Love in this third form is the Holy Spirit. It is a love that is *purely* received, since it issues in no further forms of love.

The Scriptures provide not only the basic raw material from which some such doctrine as the Trinity had to emerge but also a clear indication of the relationship that existed among the three. The Father always appears as the source of both the Son and the Spirit, as the one who sends the Son and sends the Spirit. As regards the relationship between the Son and the Spirit, the Spirit is repeatedly referred to as the Spirit of the Son and not vice versa: the Son, too, sends the Spirit but the Spirit is never spoken of as sending the Son.

Hence, Christian thinkers always spoke of the Son as proceeding – that is, coming – from the Father. As regards the Spirit, however, a dispute arose between East and West that was to become a major point of division between them. The West believed that the Spirit's dependence on the Son could only be due to the fact that the Spirit proceeds or flows from not only the Father but also the Son. This is the doctrine known as the *filioque*, a Latin word meaning 'and from the Son'. The Greeks, on the other hand, believed that the Spirit flows only from the Father, even though the Son has a role in giving the Spirit to us and even in shaping the Spirit's identity. The dispute continues to this day.

By the end of the fifteenth century, the typically Western theology of the Trinity was more or less complete. Indeed, its basic outlines had already been shaped as early as the sixth century. This is therefore a useful place to pause and summarise the main elements of that theology.

The classic formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is that there are three 'persons' in one undivided God. Each of the 'persons' is fully divine, none is 'more' God than any of the others. This means that a distinction must be made between 'person' and 'nature'. 'Nature' refers to the one undivided divine substance. 'Person' refers to the way in which that undivided substance is shared or, more accurately, to a particular way in which it exists. As used here, therefore, 'person' is a term that does not refer (as we normally do) to someone who has his or her own separate nature, mind and will. On the contrary, the divine three share fully one undivided nature, one undivided mind, one undivided will. The *whole* of the divinity – mind, will, consciousness – exists in three inseparable and undivided ways: as the unbegotten origin of all else (the Father); as the begotten expression of all that the Father is (the Son); and as (according

to one stream of thought) the bond of love between Father and Son, or (according to another stream of thought), the result of a single act of love on their part.

The three unique ways in which the divine nature exists or (as it is technically put) 'subsists' are derived from a process within the divinity that sets up a relationship between each of them. It is this relationship that distinguishes Father, Son and Spirit from each other. Indeed, it is this relationship that creates their very identity. Thus the Father is the divine nature existing as source of the Son, while the Son is the divine nature existing as flowing from the Father as the Father's image. The Spirit (in Western theology) is the divine nature existing as a love that flows from both Father and Son.

The term 'procession' here simply means the coming forth of one divine person from another. Christian tradition – both East and West – has always distinguished two processions. The first is the procession of the Son from the Father. The second is the procession of the Spirit, which in Western theology is from Father *and* Son.

The term 'procession' itself is a biblical term. It is used of the Holy Spirit's coming forth from the Father in John 15:26. Although it was originally applied only to the Holy Spirit, it came to be used in Western theology as a generic term referring to the coming forth of both Son and Spirit. Other terms were used for distinguishing between them – the Son's procession was called 'generation', the Spirit's 'spiration'.

As noted above, the Son proceeds from the Father. That, and that alone, is what is demanded by Christian orthodoxy. However, the West developed a speculative explanation of the Son's procession, one that connected it with God's mind. As refined by Thomas Aquinas, the Son proceeds from the Father's intellect, as a mental image proceeds from our intellect. This idea also meshed very well with biblical references to the Son as the 'Word' of God (John 1:1ff.), the 'image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15) and 'Wisdom' (see 1 Cor. 1:24). 'Word' and 'Wisdom' evoke ideas of a mind at work, and 'Word' also evokes the idea of the creation of a mental image.

As regards the Spirit, the West saw the Spirit as proceeding from an act of the divine will as possessed by Father and Son. The Spirit proceeded as the love or result of the love that flowed from Father and Son.

This way of understanding the divine processions was also very attractive because it seemed to make so much sense. God is a spirit, and a spirit has two basic activities: knowing and willing. That the Son should be spoken of in Scripture as the image or Word of the Father, while the Spirit is connected with divine action or love, seems to be well explained if one



sees the former as proceeding from the divine mind and the latter from the divine will.

Since the divine persons share a single nature, they are said to 'be in' or to 'flow into' each other. This is referred to as the divine *perichoresis* (a Greek term) or, to use its Latin equivalent, *circumincessio*. The rational grounding of this doctrine is simply the fact that they share one nature. However, a biblical ground was also found in Jesus' words in John 10:38.

Precisely because all that distinguishes the divine persons from each other is their mutual relationships, everything else is held by them in common. Hence, every divine action which has an effect beyond the borders of the divinity (*ad extra divinitatem*) is performed by all three acting in unison. This is a sound principle. However, it came to be distorted in Western theology by saying that one could not really distinguish the Father's contribution from that of the Son (apart from the Son's taking on a human nature), or either's contribution from that of the Spirit. Modern theologies of the Trinity have corrected this distortion.

We can now look back and see that what has developed is not simply a particular theology but a Christian *dogma*. In other words, the Trinity has become an unquestioned part of the faith of the church. The doctrine therefore has the merit of presenting a clear expression of what Christians believed were the full implications of the relevant biblical data.

On the negative side, however, we have witnessed the price paid for that clarity: the isolation of the doctrine from its roots in the involvement of Father, Son and Spirit in our salvation. Trinitarian theology had become exclusively a theology of the 'immanent' Trinity – that is, the Trinity considered solely as an inner divine reality, where all the attention is focused on the relationships between Father, Son and Spirit and on the problem of maintaining both their distinction and the divine unity. This 'immanent Trinity' became divorced from the 'economic' Trinity, which is the Trinity as involved in the 'economy' of salvation. Not surprisingly, the Trinity ceased to have any practical relevance for Christians. It contributed nothing to their experience of salvation and did not enter in any meaningful way into their prayer life. It functioned mainly as the supreme 'mystery' of their faith.

In the twentieth century, theologians have come to stress again the unity of the economic and immanent trinities. Perhaps the most renowned of the attempts to do so is that of the German theologian Karl Rahner, who loved to say that the immanent Trinity is the economic trinity and vice versa. Let us now see what a theology of the Trinity looks like that takes this principle seriously.



3. Taking God's incarnation seriously: the Trinity as a divine-human reality

As far as we are concerned, the only 'inner divine life' we know of is the relationship between the Father, the man Jesus Christ and the Spirit binding them to each other. Even if one believes that there was an inner life within God before Jesus appeared on this earth, Jesus' coming has changed that inner life forever. For Jesus' coming means that God no longer has any life that is unrelated to human beings. The Son is and remains for all eternity both a human being and part of God's own very being. The Spirit flows for all eternity from both the Father and a human being (if one subscribes to the Western *filioque*). In short, there is no such thing as a Trinity apart from humanity. What God's inner life would have looked like apart from the man Jesus of Nazareth is of no interest or relevance to us. For the fact is that the only Trinity Christians know of is one in which a human being – Jesus – is one of its members.

This is the deep truth embedded in Rahner's insistence that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and vice versa. God's own trinitarian life is an incarnate form of life. When the Word became flesh, what became incarnate was not simply a single person but a network of divine relationships. All this implies that God's inner life became something visible, something that was seen by people.

To appreciate this point, let us dwell for a moment on Jesus' baptism. There we see the Father proclaiming Jesus to be his beloved Son, and his Spirit descending on Jesus. But what we are witnessing is not simply the relationship between a human being and God, but God's own inner life exposed, made visible. We are witnessing an event taking place within the divinity. Moreover, that incident enables us to understand that the rest of Jesus' life was a life being lived within the divinity. The rest of Jesus' life was the living out of the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. The rest of Jesus' life was the living out of God's own love life.

But that is still not all. When we think of Jesus' life as the living out of God's own love life we must not look simply at Jesus' relationship with his Father and his possession of the Spirit. For Jesus stands before his Father not simply as a divine person unrelated to anything outside of the divinity but rather as a human being who has a mother, a foster-father, close relatives, distant relatives, friends, a nation – an entire world filled with joys and sorrows. All of these other links are part of his and therefore part of God's own love life. Granted, they can never be part of God in the same sense as Jesus is. But to the extent that they are part of Jesus' world, they are also part of God's world. They are a visible part of God's inner life.

God became part of humanity's world so that we can become part of God's world. The doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine that God is a community, a community of Father, Son and Spirit. Humanity, created as it is in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27), is also a community. God's plan was not that the two communities should each have their own group area but rather that they should be fully integrated. That was why the Word became flesh and the divine Spirit of love was poured out on all at Pentecost.

The idea that our life is part of God's inner life and vice versa is central to Christianity. It is the whole point of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is summed up in that famous text from 2 Peter 1:4: 'Do you not know that you are sharers in the divine nature?' In time this came to mean in both East and West that somehow or other our own being was transformed by God's presence, just as iron glows when placed in a fire. However, the fuller biblical picture is that we share in God's love life. We become, in a real sense, part of the Trinity. For the Father becomes *our* father, the Spirit of love *our* Spirit of love, binding us all to each other.

The church is meant to be the place where we can see and experience this divine–human community taking shape down the ages. For it is only in the church that we have a community of people who publicly proclaim Christ as their brother, the Father as their father and the Spirit as the love binding them to each other. The church is called to *be* something before *doing* something: to be the visible embodiment through the ages of the ongoing life of the economic Trinity.

But even in the church this divine–human community is only a shadow of what it is meant to be. It can become fully what it is meant to be only by going through the same process of death and resurrection that Jesus did. Only then will we be freed not simply from all sinful influences but also from the limitations of space and time, as we experience them. Only then will our humanity be so transformed that at last we will be able to be 'inside' each other as Father and Son are. Only then will we be able to be present to each other in the Spirit a Father and Son who are present to us now. Only then will we share as fully as a creature can in the Trinity's *perichoresis*, the unending flowing into and out of each other.

The doctrine of the Trinity thus clearly affects the way in which we view salvation. In the past salvation was viewed individualistically. That is to say, all the emphasis was on the individual's relationship with God, and with a God viewed pretty much as a single individual. However, if God is a community of Father, Son and Spirit, then salvation implies being inserted into the life of a community. To be saved means not simply having one's personal sins forgiven or getting into heaven but rather to share in the life of a community.

Moreover, if this community is not simply a divine community but a divine–human community, then to be saved is to be made part of a family that includes not only Father, Son and Spirit, but also neighbour. Love of God and love of neighbour are not merely inseparable. They are part and parcel of one and the same love, for the love that binds all the members of this divine–human community to each other is formed within them by the Love that is the Holy Spirit. Hence, building up human community can be part and parcel of the very experience of salvation. When we reach out to the poor, the lonely, the oppressed and treat them for what they are, namely our brothers and sisters, we are enabling them to experience not simply human love and caring, but also what it means to share in God’s own community life. We are enabling them to experience an important dimension of salvation.

It has become somewhat fashionable in theological writings to argue that a trinitarian model of God pushes one in the direction of democratic, egalitarian structures, while viewing God as a single person (called the ‘monarchical’ model, viewing God as a monarch) pushes one in the direction of authoritarian, hierarchical structures. The general drift of the argument is that to conceive of God as a single person, Lord of the universe, is to have a model that legitimates autocratic structures in both church and state – Pope and king. Conversely, to conceive of God as a community of co–equal persons is to have a model that demands democratic, egalitarian structures – a congregational one in church affairs and a socialist one in the political realm.

A good deal of confused thinking occurs here, for the truth is that both monarchical and trinitarian models of God can support democratic and undemocratic structures. One must not forget that it was ancient Israel’s very monarchical view of God that was the inspiration behind its originally federalist and egalitarian social structures. Moreover, the doctrine of the Trinity is not simply the doctrine that there are three co–equal persons in one God. It also asserts that there is a definite order among the persons – the Father comes first, whom the Son obeys in all things, and the Spirit witnesses to the Son and not to himself.

What is far more important than the mere structure of our model – monarchical or trinitarian – is the way God acts, especially in relation to human beings. And it is here that the doctrine of the Trinity has an undeniable advantage as a theological basis for reflecting on social structures, for the Trinity teaches us that God is structured along the lines of a self–emptying love. The Father shares everything with the Son, who gives himself totally to the Father (John 5:19ff). The Spirit is the love that

turns that ceaseless flow from Father to Son and back into something more than merely physically sharing a divine 'substance'.

If God is structured like that, then our ecclesiastical and political structures must reflect self-emptying, mutual service, love and, above all, sharing, for the real value of the Trinity as a socio-political model is to be found in the total sharing that is the very foundation for the distinction between the divine persons.

Since, in our sinful world, monarchical structures usually tend to block this idea of sharing and entrench the privileges of those in authoritarian positions, a more democratic, indeed socialist-type, structure would seem to reflect more easily the God that Christians believe in. However, whether that is so in a particular situation will depend very much on that situation. What is crucial is that Christians should oppose any social structures that work against rather than for a social climate in which the emphasis is on mutual belonging, service and sharing. If humanity's destiny is to be as one with each other ('inside' each other!) as Father and Son are, then any church or state structure that reflects that ideal, however dimly, is to be supported. On the other hand, structures that entrench radically contradictory ideals (apartheid or self-aggrandisement at the expense of others, for example) are to be opposed.

Church structures, in particular, should be subjected to piercing criticism by Christians. It is very difficult for Christians to point convincing fingers at inadequate or sinful political or economic structures if the way they structure their own togetherness in Christ reflects more of a concern for power, domination and self-centredness than the Trinity, whose life they are telling the world they share.

Finally, I would like to say something about integrating the doctrine of the Trinity into the way we practise our Christianity. Let me begin with prayer. Many Christians pray to God as though the doctrine of the Trinity did not exist. They address their prayers simply to 'God', without reflecting on which of the divine persons they are talking to.

If we take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously, it will mean becoming conscious of the persons in our prayer life. Moreover, it will mean becoming conscious of the different relationship we have with each of them. To make a conscious effort to alter our prayer habits so that we relate in a different way to Father, Son and Spirit will make the Trinity come alive for us. One will actually begin the process of living one's incorporation into God's own communal life.

Taking the Trinity seriously also means taking seriously the fact that other human beings are our brothers and sisters. It means trying to transfer some of the family feelings we have for our own blood brothers

and sisters to the wider community. I say 'some of the family feelings' because it should be obvious that it is physically impossible to relate to a large group of human beings in exactly the same way one can relate to the smaller group of one's own blood relatives. Moreover, it is only in the small group that one is able to learn the skills of loving and accepting that are so important for the stability of the larger group. However, taking seriously our insertion into the life of the Trinity means taking seriously the fact that experiencing our earthly parents and siblings is meant to be the beginning of a broader and deeper experience. This is the experience that the whole of humanity is – as intended by God – a single family in which all are brothers and sisters of each other, sharing a Love that flows out of and back to our common divine parent through our brother, Jesus Christ.

The two families – our own and that of wider humanity – are not meant to be opposed. The one should feed into and support the other. However, should they clash, one cannot without further ado choose one's blood family. The needs of the wider one could well demand that in a case of irreducible conflict we choose it. This was why Jesus said that a consequence of his coming could well be that family members are set over against each other (Matt. 10:34). This was why he said that we had to love him more than father, mother, brother, sister (Matt. 10:37ff). This was why he himself made it clear that his own brothers and sisters were far broader than the narrow circle of those who came to call him on a particular occasion (Matt. 12:50).

Our world is one in which systems such as apartheid are roundly condemned. But it is still a world in which national interests are regarded as being so important that they attempt to demand all our loyalty. Indeed, national interests are repeatedly appealed to in order to block moves that would lead to a more just international system. The United Nations does provide some forum for counteracting this tendency. But the time still has to come when Christians allow the doctrine of the Trinity to cast a sufficiently critical light on nationalism so as to condemn many of its forms with all the ferocity with which apartheid was condemned. For much of contemporary nationalism is really just apartheid with large and dressed up in an acceptable way.

Part of a Christian's spirituality, therefore, is to see not only the family but also the nation-state as but a sign of a larger reality. And it is this larger reality, the establishment of a divine-human community, that operates as a final, absolute yardstick against which all lesser loyalties must be measured. Family loyalties and national loyalties do indeed have their place, an extremely important place. Without them we cannot grow in the experience of loving and sharing. However, they are but

embodiments of a larger reality and it is the larger, trinitarian reality that is of ultimate importance.

Note that I said that it is the larger, trinitarian reality that is of ultimate importance – and not simply that it is God, the Trinity, that is of ultimate importance. The reason is, once again, that we cannot separate the immanent and economic trinities. Humanity is part of God's inner life, for Jesus was and remains forever a human being. And by the same token, God is part of humanity's life. This means that we cannot separate God and humanity and say that the former is of ultimate significance while the latter has only relative value. Belief in the economic Trinity means that we can no longer separate the two. Certainly it is possible to separate individual human beings from the economic Trinity and from the broader divine-human community centred on the economic Trinity. The doctrine of hell is the doctrine that this awful possibility exists. But it is not possible to separate the human from the divine and give ultimate significance only to the latter.

This is why Jesus regarded love of neighbour and love of God as being inextricably linked, so much so that one could say that they are of equal importance (Matt 22:38–39). It is why he was able to say that God's sabbath Sunday! – was established for humanity's needs (Mark 2:27). The doctrine of the Trinity means that love of neighbour, too, has ultimate significance.

With that we have come to the end of this brief survey of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christianity. As can be seen, it is a doctrine that the infinite reality called 'God' is a community. It is a doctrine that this God has created the community of humanity for the purpose of sharing in that inner divine life. It is a doctrine that points us to the basic values necessary for sharing in it: self-emptying, even to the point of the Cross. It is a doctrine that tells us that God and humanity cannot be separated, with absolute value being given to the former and relative value to the latter. Rather it teaches us that the two have become so completely one that the best image for what the future holds in store for us is that we will be 'inside' each other – as Father, Son and Spirit are.

# The Living God<sup>1</sup>

Jaap Durand

## 1. Introduction

Currently, the issue of God is central to theological reasoning. Our first reaction to such an obvious statement can be one of surprise. What else can be central to theological reasoning than simply God? Is theology not the *Logos* about God?

Such a surprise and similar issues are justified. Ultimately, theology is indeed about God. Theology forms the heart of church dogma. In theology, decisions determine other disciplines in one way or another. But this is not all. That the issue of God is central to current theological reasoning is not as obvious as it would appear from the above. This was not always the case in the history of theology. Doctrines on the being of God and on the Trinity were the most consistent doctrines within the field of Dogmatics. Once theological reasoning about God was more or less established, there was hardly any mention of any theories beyond the basic framework. The actual theological dispute was considered to be within the field of God's works. This triggered a fatal gap between God's being and his works, between himself and his revelation. This resulted in theology often being a futile part of dogmatics, with hardly any or no link to other doctrines. This was especially the case in post-Reformation theology, where a speculative mediaeval theology coincided with Reformation Christology and soteriology.

Another approach typifies current theological reflection. A starting point is basically that theology must at all times maintain the unity of God and his revelation. Theology thus acquires greater mobility. It is more closely integrated with other doctrines within the field of dogmatics as a whole.

While we are undoubtedly grateful for this development, we should not overlook a potential threat in this instance. The emphasis on the unity of God's being and his works can easily turn theology into a way of

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1 Translated from Durand, J. 1976. *Die Lewende God: Wegwysers in die Dogmatiek*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel. 9–10; 46–48; 58–61; 71–76; 84–90; 98–99.

theologising where it does not seem that God is more than his revelation, and where there is hardly any trace of an individual's hesitation to talk about God. The Book of Judges (13:18) clearly warns against human overconfidence and presumption: 'Why do you ask my name, seeing he is wonderful?' Does the second commandment not simply mean that there is no likeness of God – that the church cannot tie him to dogmatic concepts and images? Can there be a greater deterrent for an all too easy theological interaction with God's secret than this? It is indeed about God's *secret*. God is incomprehensible. He is still greater than the most eloquent statements about him – *Deus semper maior!*

In light of this, theology should have kept silent about God, if it were not that the revelation is all about the self-disclosure of the incomprehensible God, if God did not give us the opportunity to talk about him *within the context and boundaries of his revelation*, without trespassing on the ban on images. In his words, theology must be saturated with the fact that God's self-revelation does not mean that he submits to man. In God's revelation, we are aware of his divine unfathomable nature, because in this instance, we come into contact with his immeasurable grace. This fact withholds theology from a purely theoretical speculation about God; but theology turns every statement about him into praise.

Theology thus fluctuates between the *courage* to make statements about God on the basis of the revelation, and *hesitation* because it is about the *God* of the revelation. Ultimately, this means that every statement about God can only be *a conversation with God*. Theology is thus simultaneously prayer and doxology.

It should be obvious, without further argument, that theology rarely, if ever, complies with the above requirements. The guidelines in this monograph do not assume this. An attempt will be made to derive something from the conflict between courage and hesitation in the theological dispute about God's secret. To some extent, this conflict not only forms the background to the dogmatic-historical section, but it is also a basic element of most of the topics raised in the second section.

## 2. Guidelines

In reflecting on the road we have travelled, we can now attempt to give some guidelines for a scriptural reflection on the relationship of God and his revelation.

Unlike the abstract idea of God in Hellenism, which views God as the in-himself-resting Being, we meet God on virtually every page of the Bible as the living and acting God. He is the *living* God who made heaven and earth (Acts 14:15). Unlike the passive idol, Yahwe is the acting God



(Isa. 46:7–11) who works; nobody can stop this (Isa. 43:13). In all these actions, God is the subject of his deeds. Nowhere in Scripture is there a conflict between God and his deeds; it is as if his activity is foreign to his being. He is the God of loyalty and justice; his works are complete (Deut. 32:4). His works have been known to him since eternity (Acts 15:18) and he is true in his ways (Rev. 15:3).

As his deeds imply the reality of God, his reality is known only through his deeds. God makes *himself* known through his multiple deeds; he is known as the living God (Jos. 3:10; Isa. 19:20–21). Juda learns his Name, that is, knows himself (Isa. 52:6). He can be rightly angry when Israel, which has seen his deeds for forty years, does not yet know him from these deeds (Ps. 95:8–11; cf. Hebr. 3:9–10). Every action by God that concerns man directly or indirectly is thus *revelation*. Just as there is no conflict between God's being and his works, there is no conflict between his being and his revelation. This already applies to God's revelation in the Old Testament, and more so to his final revelation in Christ. The revelation of the divine secret of salvation lies in Christ: God revealed in the flesh (I Tim. 3:16). He is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15); God lives physically in him (Col. 2:9); whoever sees him has seen the Father (John 14:9). The revealed mystery is merely the salvation events of God's personal coming to the world in the form of Jesus Christ, true God, and true human. The belief in God is not only a belief in Christ's acts of love and justice, but also, on the basis of these acts, a *certainty* that God is love and justice from eternity to eternity. When God *does* love, He *is* also love (I John 4:8–10). He revealed himself not only as the Father; he *is* the Father. Through the Holy Spirit, he declared Jesus not only as the Son (Rom. 1:4), but he himself is the Son (Rom. 9:5). The implication is that every dogmatic statement about God is the belief that the revealed God and God Self is one and the same God.

While we abide by the unity of God and his revelation, we must simultaneously, on the basis of God's word of revelation and not on the basis of an abstract philosophical theory on the incomprehensible and transcendent God, confess that God is more than his revelation. We can talk about revelation only if God does not coincide with his revelation. The reality of God is not solved in his deeds. Because he is more than his deeds, he can work. Because he is more than his revelation and precedes it, he can reveal himself. With this 'more', we do not want to introduce conflict between God's being and his revelation, as if God is still 'different' from what he himself reveals. It is simply the recognition that God himself does not mention in his revelation that he is a calculable God. In Exodus 3:13, when Moses asks him about his name, which boils down to a question about his being, he answers with a verb: 'I am what I am', or possibly also: 'I will

be what I will be' (v. 14). This is followed by: 'I am', or 'I will be', or even 'I will be there (with you)'. Based on these statements, we can gain the impression that Moses' question is rejected; this is likely if we compare it with Genesis 32:29 and Judges 13:18. We cannot express his being by name and as such get hold of him. Rather, Moses is referred to his *events*, his presence, his being there for the people of Israel. God does not reveal his inner being, but ensures that he is available, notably by his nameless name (Miskotte), and known from his deeds. In his devotion to man, God remains the free one over whom we cannot rule (cf. Ex. 19:12–13; 33:20–23). The message of the New Testament is no different. Although, in this instance, we witness God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, notwithstanding that Christ himself is the explanation of the nameless name of God (John 17:6), God is an inaccessible light (I Tim. 6:16). Whoever saw Jesus saw the Father; yet nobody can see God (I Tim. 6:16). The confidence to call God 'Our Father' is coupled with the confession that he is 'in the heavens' (Matt. 6:9). God's being goes beyond his revelation; yet there is nothing of God therein except God Self. Although we cannot enter the hidden depths of his being, we are also aware of a mystery that is disclosed (Col. 1:27). We are assured that what is known of God through his revelation does not conflict with what he is. Berkhof (1973:111)<sup>2</sup> attempts to explain this idea by using a geometric image: the revelation is not a voluntary segment from the circle of God's being, but a sector, a piece that reaches right into the middle. Irrespective of the size of the sector, it leads to the heart.

We need to explain how to judge correctly the merits of the theological statement that God is a Person. The easy self-evidence with which we talk about the 'Person' of God, not only in theological personalism, but also in general in the more orthodox theologies, makes it a very attractive concept to address, not in the least because we believe that there is a faithful rendering of the God image on nearly every page in the Bible. Yet we may not ignore the problems and objections in this matter. Two objections must be mentioned. First, the concept of 'person', as applied to God, occurs not only in the Holy Scripture, but also in Christian theology. The second objection is closely linked to the first. It can and does happen that a modern concept of 'person' is used as a formal category that defines God. The concept of 'person' obtains, in other words, a normative function within divinity.

The first objection is of no crucial significance. Theology cannot be a biblicist's repetition of Scripture. It has a hermeneutic function that endeavours to interpret the message of Scripture in an intelligible way. This implies the use of understandable terms that essentially cover what

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2 H. Berkhof, *Christelijk Geloof*, Nijkerk 1973:111.

is given in Scripture. Indeed, there is the risk that such terms can take on a normative function.

The validity of the second objection must thus be fully acknowledged. The only way in which this risk can be avoided is to note the original restricted set-up in which God's personality is mentioned in modern times. Ultimately, this is about a *defence formula*. Comprehensibly, this shows that we do not address God in the neuter form; this guards against God becoming an abstract idea or identifying him with some cosmic force. Unlike naturalism and pantheistic mysticism, the concept of 'person', as applied to God, renders the basic message of the Holy Scripture, namely that God is not 'something', but a living 'someone' who has a relationship with man. This relationship is not a given that emerges, as it were, by itself, as in the case of man's involvement with the forces of nature. The initiative comes from God. This relationship refers to his decision (cf. 2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 1:9). He meets man as the willing, acting, living God. Because he calls man, man can call him. Because he calls man by his name, man can call him. Because he calls man by his name (Isa. 43:3), man can also call him by name (Isa. 43:3); he has a name (Isa. 42:8). The God of Scripture truly has a name. He is not an idea and thus nameless. As noted in paragraph 2.1, the name Yahweh is not a definition of God that equals him to an impersonal divine power. It is a real name, a personal name that cannot divulge the deepest secret of its bearer. In this name, the divine 'I' meets man somewhere (Isa. 41:4; 42:8; 43:11).

The above clearly shows why the relationship between God and man in Scripture is always described in personal terms, analogous to the relationship between human beings. This is the relationship between father and son (Hos. 11:1-4), between man and woman (Hos. 2:1, 15), and between lord and servant (Ps. 123:2). This is coupled with the anthropomorphic way in which the Holy Scripture talks about God. As an abstract principle or an impersonal power, God is totally beyond the field of view of the authors of the Bible.

Some theologians are quick to point out that the anthropomorphic talk about God includes an unending proverb. They find it unacceptable to talk about God as a person, because this is based on this unending proverb. Suffice it to mention two remarks in this regard. First, all talk of man about God is anthropomorphic. Man cannot transcend his own world. For this reason, we cannot describe talking about God, who tries to avoid all possible human expressions and uses abstract concepts as non-human. Concepts such as 'the unconditional' (Tillich 1963) are, after all, concepts designed by man. Secondly, against the background of the said objection lies the unacceptable starting point that was rejected in paragraph 2.1,

namely, to distinguish between the actual God and the revelation God. No *other* God will hide *behind* the revelation. Whoever accepts this latter statement talks about God only in terms of a person. If we still doubt, we are finally faced with the incarnation of the Word. In the incarnation, all impersonal neutrality and abstraction ends when God reveals himself in the person of Jesus Christ as the Living Lord. In its Christological confession, the church spotted this point well. As a supernatural power, God does not take possession of man, Jesus of Nazareth. The person of the *Logos* takes on human flesh, and this person can tell Phillip: 'He who sees me, has seen the Father' (John 14:9).

By talking about God as a person, theology conveys the essential and irreplaceable moment in the Gospel when God and man are in a living relationship, in which God addresses man as *man*, *talks to* him, and takes him *into his community*. In this sense, we cannot object to the use of the term. It is also obvious that there are risks associated with addressing this, especially when, as Thielicke rightly warns, a specific concept of 'person' becomes the norm for thinking about God. Theological personalism does not escape altogether from this risk. On the one hand, while we deserve to interpret an essential aspect of the biblical proclamation, specific proponents thereof tend to base the being (person) of God on a personal view of reality, on the other. We must also agree with Barth that the mere statement that God is a person is meaningless, unless the concept is filled with what God revealed about himself. As mentioned earlier, dealing with the concept of 'person', in respect of theology, mainly fulfils a defensive function. It defends a false and non-scriptural image of God rather than answering the question: Who is God?

This does not yet settle a problem. Can we substantiate the statement that God is a person along with the classical trinitarian confession that God is one Being and three persons?

In summary: As far as the doctrine of the trinity is concerned, we can now note the following main aspects.

The fact that the doctrine of the trinity is addressed after the paragraph on the personality of God is simply for the purpose of methodology, for the sake of organising the subject matter. The place of the doctrine of the trinity in theology is not considered. There is the danger that the doctrine of the trinity will be viewed as an appendix to a 'general' theology. Such a 'general' theology is not Christian theology, because the God of Scripture revealed himself in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit as the Triune God. No Christian doctrine of God's Being and deeds is possible without implying the Trinity. The old doctrine of the trinity did not develop from a general image of God, but from the church's problem with the Scriptural

witness concerning the person of Christ. The widespread opinion that the doctrine of the trinity has to do with speculation is thus wrong. Indeed, the doctrine of the trinity can keep the dogmatics in its reflection on God from speculation because this has to do with the God who revealed himself in Christ. Not only does the doctrine of the trinity keep the dogmatics from speculation about God, but it is simultaneously the fundamental doctrine of the church that maintains the unity of God and his revelation. Against every form of modalism, in which the 'actual' God hides behind the various historical masks of his revelation, the confession of the basic trinity of God is the recognition that God reveals *himself*: we meet him in the revelation as the Triune, because of his being.

The doctrine of the trinity is not built only, not even in the first instance, on some of the New Testament's triadic texts (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:13). This is the interpretation of the joint witness of the New Testament according to its own core: the person and deeds of Jesus Christ. Yet the triadic statements indicate that, already in the New Testament, the decisive step had been taken in the direction of a full trinitarian confession; the authors of the Bible started to draw trinitarian conclusions from their confession that Jesus is the Lord. Matthew 28:18 can hardly be viewed as merely a triadic formula. The baptism (see Eph. 4:5) occurs in the one name (cf. Acts 10:48) and the baptised becomes the property of the one Lord. The baptised do not have three Lords, but only one Lord. The trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit does not discard the unity, but is its form. Despite this clear trinitarian tendency in the New Testament (cf. Eph. 4:4–6; 1 Cor. 12:4–6), the doctrine of the trinity is not based on this scant text, but on the fundamental witness of the New Testament, namely that, in Christ, we have to do with God himself and that Christ is, indeed, God himself. This witness is irrefutably clear. Despite the classical proofs concerning the deity of Christ, which directly call him 'God' (John 1:1; 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13), the New Testament clearly mentions that we meet God himself in him. He is God with us (Matt. 1:23); in him lives the fullness of the deity physically (Col. 2:9); he is God revealed in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16). He is one with the Father (John 10:30, 38) and is often called upon with the Father (1 Thess. 3:11) and sometimes alone (Acts 7:59–60; 2 Cor. 12:8). He takes part in the divine work of creation (Col. 1:16; John 1:3; Hebr. 1:2) and he was the subject of the apparitions of God in the Old Testament (John 12:41, with reference to Isa. 6). Against the background of this selection of texts and many more, it is significant that the earliest community – living at the time of the Old Testament! – gives Christ the title of Kurios, the name expressing the holy tetragram Yahweh. It should thus no longer surprise us that the Old Testament proclamation concerning the glory of

God also applies to him. He is the Lord of the glory (1 Cor. 2:8; see Tit. 2:13; 1 Peter 4:13; Mark 13:26; John 1:14; 2:11, and so on).

As clearly as the New Testament witnesses the divinity of Christ and his unity with the Father, it is also obvious that there is no mention of an *identity* between Father and Son. The Son is truly the Son, as distinguished from the Father (John 4:34; 5:19). This non-identity, however, is expressed not only in respect of the incarnation, but also in respect of him who is *sent* to be born from a woman (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3). The early-Christian hymn, which Paul quotes in Phil. 2:5, also refers to the self-emptying and self-humiliation of Christ to his being in the form of God and uses the predicate 'equal to' God (Phil. 2:6; cf. John 5:18).

This witness of Scripture concerning the non-identity of Christ and the Father, against the background of his divinity and unity with the Father, determines the origin of the doctrine of the trinity. The Christological starting point would only develop further towards pneumatology. The church also had sufficient New Testament witnesses for this. God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ takes place in the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can convey that Jesus is the Lord (1 Cor. 12:13). With our spirit, the Holy Spirit witnesses that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16). The Spirit is not a mere power of God, but it is God himself (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16). Yet this also applies to him who is sent (John 15:26), like the Son. Consequently, there was a time when he was not there (John 7:39). He is, therefore, the other comforter (John 14:16) who, besides the Father and the Son, is the source of all salvation (Rev. 1:4–5; 2 Cor. 13:13).

The most striking trait of the New Testament's witness of Christ is that it happens against the background of the Old Testament's key confession of God: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Deut. 6:4). Not only does Christ himself refer to this confession (Mark 12:29), but Paul can also tell the readers that there is no other God, except One (1 Cor. 8:4; cf. 1 Tim. 2:5; Eph. 4:6; Jacob 2:19). No impression is created anywhere that Christ's proclamation in the New Testament deprives this confession of power in any way. The ease with which Paul highlights both the divinity of Christ and the unity of God is so surprising in that he was convinced of the fact that the full unity of God emerged *in* the confession of Christ and the Spirit together with the Father. We find excellent examples of this impartiality and ease in 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Ephesians 4:4–6. In 1 Corinthians 8:6, the confession of the one God and Father is linked to the confession of the one Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly, in Ephesians 4, the praise of the one Spirit (v. 4) and the one Lord (v. 5) precede the praise of the one God and Father (v. 6). The Spirit, the Lord, and God the Father:

this is one God who excludes any second or third. The trinity is indeed the form of the unity.

We noted that Christian religion cannot, without reserve, be called a theistic religion. Christianity can easily be viewed as one specific example of a category of religions that can be summarised under one name. The question is whether the same objections affect the term 'monotheism'. Is Christianity merely a variant of a specific type of religion besides, for example, Islam and Judaism? If this is the case, do these religions represent a strong monotheism more purely than Christianity itself? Even Schleiermacher, who labelled Christian religion as the highest form of monotheism, was aware of the fact that the term is inadequate to highlight the specificity of this religion. The inadequacy of the term is, however, not the only problem. The whole concept of monotheism is strongly Graeco-philosophical, with an unquestionable tendency towards Deism. Plotinus solves monotheism's concept of unity. God is the One who lacks quality. Because of this, there is an issue concerning the possibility of revelation, the possibility that God can break free from Himself without stopping to be the one God. While monotheism works with the numerical one as abstraction, the biblical idea concerning the unity of God goes further than that. God is not one because the number one is better than numbers two or three; God is one because he is the Only One. There is no second or third besides him. The unity of Yahweh is his unity (cf. 1 Con. 8:60; 2 Con. 19:15, 19; Isa. 42:8; Jer. 2:11). A similar thought is echoed in the New Testament concerning the unity of God. The issue concerning numbers has been an issue for centuries in the reflection on the Trinity. It originates from the abstract concept of unity of monotheism, which is basically foreign to the New Testament.

The doctrine of the trinity maintains the unity of God's being and his revelation. God is the God who reveals himself. We noted that God is still more than his revelation. He is never a predictable God. This idea also has consequences for the doctrine of the trinity. Can theology go further than merely confessing that the one God introduced himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Does Scripture give us room to ask about the *how* of the Trinity, rather than the *that* of the Trinity? The boundaries drawn by Scripture itself must give us an answer to this, even where the starting point for the doctrine of the trinity is consciously taken in the revelation, in order to highlight the unity of the trinity of both revelation and being, the reflection on the trinity can, where the boundaries of Scripture are not considered, express a speculative intrusion into the being of God. There is no doubt that this objection affects some of the modern views on trinity. By simply keeping to the boundaries of Scripture, we fully recognise that God is not immersed in his revelation.



In addition, with respect to the classical trinitarian formula of one Being and three Persons, we can raise the question as to whether this is not leaning towards speculation. It is obvious that the claim of speculation can be directed only at the specific terms used, namely 'being' and 'person', because they are not used in this sense in Scripture. The mere fact that the terms do not occur in Scripture with the same meaning does not make them necessarily speculative. The question is whether they indeed cover what is given in Scripture.

There are, however, problems with the terms used. The concept 'being', from the Greek *ousia*, is deeply rooted in Greek philosophy. The Latin equivalents of this concept are *essentia* (essence), *natura* (nature), or *substantia* (substance), the latter being the most common in the doctrine of the trinity: God is 'one substance' (*una substantia*). The problem with this concept is the Aristotelian idea of substance, from which it derives and according to which a specific substance or being has characteristics that take part in being. Applied to the doctrine of the trinity, it can lead to the wrong conclusion that the divine persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit take part in being or it can be used as a concept that includes the concrete persons of Father, Son, and Spirit. The latter idea leads to tritheism, whereas the former raises a fourth category, as it were, the divine being or substance, besides the Father, Son, and Spirit. The term can thus be upheld only if viewed as the expression for the real God, as an indication that everything that is not God must be excluded. Otto Weber's proposition, in agreement with Barth, that the concept of the 'Divinity' of God must be understood, is highly acceptable (*Grundlagen der Dogmatik* I 146).

The issue concerning the 'characteristics' (attributes?) of God is one of the most difficult in dogmatics. Yet, based on the above, some perspectives are given as to how to address this doctrine.

We noted that God is more than his revelation; that it is impossible to express his being by name in order to rule Him. His name, as an expression of his being, is after all wonderful (Judg. 13:18) and is beyond every human being's understanding. He is the *incomparable*: 'To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?' (Isa. 40:25; cf. Ps. 35:10; 40:6; Jer. 10:6). A similar thought is echoed in the New Testament when Paul states: 'For no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.' (I Cor. 2:11). In this instance, the *what* question about God is cut at the root. In light of this, we must indeed ask whether theology has the right to talk about characteristics, attributes, virtues, or perfections of God. Does the issue about the 'characteristics' of God coincide with the Aristotelian idea of substance, according to which a specific substance or



being has specific static characteristics? If so, is the question about the characteristics of something not always a *what* question? A *what* question is always a question about something within itself. Thus, the question about God's 'characteristics' is a *what* question, a question about God within himself. However, in theology, if we had to do with God within himself, theology could only have been a negative theology, in the sense that no pronouncement can be made about God. We can remain silent about God in himself, because only the Spirit of God knows what is in God.

A second problem is associated with such a view of divine 'characteristics'. If we distinguish between the being of a thing and its characteristics, we can in an abstract way consider this thing, despite its characteristics. However, the 'characteristics' attributed to God cannot be ignored. God is no longer God if he is not almighty. In order to evade this problem, Western theology maintains that God does not have 'characteristics' in the above sense (*in Deum non cadit accidens* – Augustine), but that every characteristic expresses the being of God (cf. above on Barth). If this is the case, it is undoubtedly clear that, in speaking about God's 'characteristics', we have to do with a *what* question.

With its doctrine on the characteristics of God, theology never meant to give a non-inclusive definition of the *what* concerning God. An indication of this is the distinction between characteristics resting and remaining in God, on the one hand, and the characteristics of God's work and relationship with the world, on the other. Strictly speaking, in the latter, not a *what*, but a *how* question is posed: How is God in his relationship with the created? In most of the divine 'characteristics' dealt with hereunder, it is also clear that this basically has to do with a relationship: love, grace, mercy, justice and truthfulness, among others. With the so-called characteristics resting in God, they get stuck at the *what* question concerning God's being itself. Although Bavinck, and later especially Barth and Berkhof, tried to reduce this strong distinction between resting (uncommunicable) and working (communicable) 'characteristics' as much as possible and to get away from the idea of God within himself, the terms (characteristics, attributes, perfections) they use are taxing, making it difficult for them to say that this does not concern a *what* question about God.

I Corinthians 2:11 makes any *what* question about God within himself impossible, thereby forcing faith and theology into complete silence about God. The Spirit that examines the depths of God (v. 10) reveals Christ as the wisdom of God (vv. 7–9; cf. 1:30) 'so that we may know what God out of grace gave to us' (v. 12). Unlike not knowing what is in God, we know about the grace of God. In this instance, we find the deepest thought in Melancton: 'To know Christ, is to know his generosity.' Calvin has similar

thoughts. Christian faith does not deal with God within himself, but with God in his revelation to us. In agreement with this, it is futile to examine the *what* (*quid*) that is God; we should rather ask: *How* (*qualis*) is God and what agrees with his nature (Inst. I, 2, 2)?

As far as God's attributes are concerned, it is not about a *what* question about God, but about a *why* question. Not: What is God? But: How is God? In God's self-revelation, the *what* of the being of God is not revealed, but his attributes toward us are. This is basically about relationship. Even in Scripture's 'is' statements on God, this relationship is clearer. John's (4:8) statement 'God is love' is not about a general pronouncement about God within himself, but about God's relationship, his love towards us that is revealed in the sending of his only born son (v. 9). I John 1:5 – God is light – offers a metaphysical answer to a *what* question about God. John's speech is directly linked to the revelation of the Word of life (John 1:1), which is the *light of the people* (John 1:4) and the *light of the world* (John 8:12). The fact that John's statements cannot be reversed (love is God or the light is God) confirms that this does not relate to general statements about God. In Scripture, God's statements are not there for the sake of themselves. They are still linked to thanks and praise, through prayer, message, or claim. We can also give an example from what is normally dealt with under the resting characteristics of God: his omnipresence. Psalm 139, the classical Scripture section concerning God's omnipresence, is directly linked to the comforting message – 'even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast' (v. 10) – that man cannot escape from God.

Do we prefer to talk about the capabilities of God instead of the characteristics? We must also guard against a misunderstanding that can arise in this instance, namely that there is a distinction between the being of God and his capabilities, as if God is different from his capabilities. God is still more than his revealed capabilities, but he is different. The revelation is about his true self-revelation. For this reason, Scripture can also describe the capability of God's love as that God is love. God is in a relationship with us as our Father – including his love, grace, mercy, trust, and patience – but he is that in this relationship. Therefore, Calvin, who rejects the *what* question about God and directs our thoughts to *how* God is, immediately adds: What agrees with his nature? There is no mention of division, in this instance, but of agreement between God's being and his capabilities.

It is obvious from the above that we cannot classify a distinction between what God is within himself (resting characteristics) and what He is for us (working characteristics), or between his static characteristics and his free deeds in the history of salvation. In fact, it is impossible to

talk about resting or working capabilities. This recognition is valid when we note that the identity speech of the Old Testament (JHVH is God) is irreversible. Nowhere in the Old Testament does an irreversibility occur (cf. Deut. 4:35, 39; 7:9; 10:17; II Sam. 7:28; I Con. 18:39; Ps. 105:7; Isa. 25:1; Joel 3:7, etc.). God is not a general concept that can be qualified, among others, as closer than JHVH. We cannot make an impartial analysis of what God is and thereafter state that JHVH is not so. Who God is, is out-and-out qualified by the name: JHVH, JHVH who makes Himself known only through his deeds (par. 2.1), in which he is in a relationship with the created. Finally, this means that we can know God's being and capabilities only from his revelation deeds in Jesus Christ. This includes that the fullness and tremendous power of the Old Testament revelation of God must wholly penetrate the New Testament, if we are to understand the New Testament revelation of God in all its dimensions. In addition, Christ clearly shows the ultimate significance of what is found in the Old Testament about God's action and salvation action. Consequently, when Scripture mentions God's wisdom, life or glory, the full sense of that wisdom can be known only when it is revealed in the secrecy of the cross (I Cor. 1:24); the full significance of life can emerge only where it appears in Christ as the Word of life (I John 1:1–3); the glory of God is abundant; it shines on Christ's face (II Cor. 4:4, 6); and it is known in the gospel as a service of the Spirit that justifies (II Cor. 3:8–9). In Christ, God told man truly everything that he said to man and this word is the word of the love of God, who, as love in the extreme (John 13:1), conquers sin on the cross. All other statements about God must be understood on the basis of the central statement that God is love.

It is thus obvious that God's omnipotence is not something that can be scrutinised on its own. In Scripture, it is about the omnipotence of his love whereby he achieves his aim (Gen. 18:14; Luke 1:37; Mark 10:27). Christ is the power of God (I Cor. 1:24); in Christ, God triumphs over the powers (Col. 2:15); he subjects everything to himself (Phil. 3:21), and he does what we pray and think over and above everything (Eph. 3:20). When, apart from Christ, we speculate about God's omnipotence and link this to a causality, this creates a tension between God's power and his love. It is only in Christ that God's love is not threatened by his omnipotence.

Scripture is not interested in a general speculation about God's relationship with space. Consequently, when God's omnipresence is mentioned, it is first about his presence, his presence in Christ as the Emanuel, the God-with-us (Matt. 1:23). God lives among us in Christ (John 1:14); he lives through his Spirit in the community (John 14:23; Eph. 2:22), and he will come to stay with us finally (Rev. 21:3). Based on the security of God's true presence in Christ, there is the security that he is the sovereign

*Lord* of time and space. He is fully present in the spatial Jesus (Col. 2:9), so that whoever meets this Jesus also meets the omnipresent Father.

Whatever concerns God's omnipotence and omnipresence also concerns his immutability. When Scripture addresses the immutability of God, it is not within the framework of a wise problem in which the static immutability of an absolute being is set against the mutability of a creature-like being-to-be. Scripture's message concerning the immutability of God is directly associated with his covenant. He bears his people from birth and remains the same until his old age (Isa. 46:3-4). As the Father of Lights, the Source of all glory and grace, there is no change or shadow of conversion in him (Jac. 2:17). This immutability does not exclude that he, as *living* person, reacts to man's actions. Scripture abounds in these divine reactions, but in this reaction, he remains true to himself (II Tim. 2:12-13). This immutable covenant of God is fully revealed in Christ. The incarnation of the Word (John 1:14) is God's reaction to the contingent fact of man's sin, but in this change, he simply remains the immutable God of the covenant. On the basis of his salvation in Christ, faith knows that God does not act randomly, but that he will react as he did in Christ. Jesus Christ is and will be the same yesterday, today and for ever (Hebr. 13:8). Scripture unfolds the meaning of all immutability statements: not the immutability of a rigid immobility, but of the living, acting God who remains true to himself and to us in Christ. If faith adheres to the name of Christ, it not only relies on God's fixed actions, but it simultaneously confesses that God remains the same from eternity to eternity before and after his deeds. The rise of a rigid immobility of God's idea means, however, no choice for a God-to-be. This would amount to trading in a foreign wise scheme of Scripture for another. An emerging idea, in which there is no room for God's immutability, places a question mark on the reliable identity of God. Then we would no longer be able to talk about the *living* God, but at most about the changing life or the developing history that appear to be divine.

The Christological unfolding of the capabilities of God confirms the issue of distinguishing between uncommunicable and communicable 'characteristics', even in Barth's distinction between the perfections of God's freedom and love, or Berkhof's distinction between the characteristics of God's transcendence and candescence. This is a fake distinction, because Barth, Berkhof and Weber approach the characteristics of God's transcendence (freedom) from a Christological perspective and must still emphasise the unity of freedom and love, transcendence and candescence.

Based on these considerations, we must also reject the dialectics of Bruner's distance-creating holiness and community-creating love, especially where he applies it to the being of God within himself and sets

this off against his characteristics, as it concerns the world. Although Prenter (1967) formally deals with a distinction between holiness and mercy, the result of his doctrine of characteristics is different and has specific merit. When Prenter addresses the characteristics of God as anger and grace, it is not strictly speaking about a principle of classifying God's characteristics, but about a double point of view from which to consider God's capabilities.

We meet God, *without Christ*, in his anger (Rom. 1:18). Whereas God's omnipotence is visible in Christ as the omnipotence of his love, it can also be revealed as the unknown power of his anger (Ps. 90:11) that shatters rulers (Ps. 110:5) and moves man, without Christ, towards sin (Rom. 1:20, 24). In Christ, God's omnipresence is his boundless loving presence (Ps. 23:4); without Christ, this means the inevitability of his judgement: 'Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?' declares the Lord "'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the Lord."

The above clearly shows that we cannot consider God's anger in terms of a static 'characteristic'. In his anger, God acts in a specific relationship with man, and this is God's characteristic. The question is: is this about the capability of God that agrees with his nature? If we want to maintain our point of view that God's revelation is self-revelation, then we must answer this question in the affirmative: if God reveals his anger, then anger is not foreign to God's being; then his anger is not, as Ritschl states, the sinner's subjective misunderstanding of God. But, if it is so, it creates a problem for us. Then anger is not a point of view from which we consider the capabilities of God, but it is itself one of God's capabilities.

Looking at Scripture, it immediately appears that God is not simultaneously the God of anger and the God of love. There is a moment in his anger, a life in his benevolence (Ps. 30:6); he will not remain angry for ever (Ps. 103:9); he averts (Isa. 12:1) or delays his anger (Isa. 48:9). He does not direct us to anger (1 Thess. 5:9). Should God confine his benevolence in anger, this would mean, to the believer's greatest concern, that God is changeable in his faith (Ps. 77:10–11). Finally, on the cross, where the terrifying depth of God's anger is noted in the God-forgotten Christ, it is revealed that not anger, but love, which determines God. For this reason, God's anger can be understood as God's only real and effective 'no' against sin. Since sin implies the rejection of the love of God, anger is simply God's love that stops him from being rejected (John 3:36; Matt. 18:32–34; Mark 3:5; Rom. 2:4–5). God's anger is not one of his capabilities, but the opposite of his *love*. In this reaction of his love, God's loving omnipotence becomes a destructive omnipotence; the boundless nature of his gracious presence

becomes the unavoidable nature of his judgement; his justice that builds one up and provides justice (Isa 11:4) becomes a punitive justice.

In order to give some direction to the problem of the relationship of God and suffering, we need to adhere to the distinction made at the start of this paragraph. On the one hand, the classical theopaschistic problem statement that is directly linked to the Christological issue of the unity of the Person of Christ in his suffering. On the other hand, there is the possibility that God can suffer, without this issue being called up by the Christological problem.

A detailed discussion of the Christological problem does not resort under theology as such and will be discussed under Christology. A few remarks suffice for our purpose. Berkhouwer's criticism touches the core of the matter. If God suffered on the cross, then we can question the confession of the suffering of the *human being* Jesus of Nazareth under God's anger. This soteriological criticism does not necessarily derive from the idea of a non-suffering God. Indeed, in its rejection of theopaschitism and its emphasis that the Son of God suffered after incarnation, the early church proceeded from the idea of God's susceptibility of suffering. But even if the church did not proceed from it, it would still have to arrive at the same formulation for soteriological considerations.

For these soteriological reasons, we must reject the modern theopaschistic thoughts as far as they base God's suffering on a conflict and paradox in the being of God himself. In this instance, the human nature of Christ also disappears; it is indispensable for the biblical doctrine of reconciliation. In addition, reconciliation is viewed as a drama that is played out in the being of God, and the cross is but a revelation of this drama. As such, the cross loses its character as a once historical reconciliatory action of God. Within such train of thought, it can no longer be true that reconciliation really occurred on the cross.

Our rejection of the theopaschistic thought that God himself suffered on the cross, without the express mention of the human flesh as the medium of suffering, does not mean the acceptance of an apathic God idea. This is not a wise choice for a God who is exempt from suffering and affliction. We cannot enforce such a choice upon ourselves because we are dealing with an abundance of biblical witnesses directed against every thought of indifference and loss of affection. This indisputable scriptural witness leads Berkhouwer to talk about divine compassion. Scripture tells us about God who is, in reality, involved with human life through his compassion and suffering. This God is compassionate and does not look down, unperturbed, upon the suffering of man; but in man's fears, he himself is afraid and, out of compassion, he saves man (Isa. 63:9).

He can get into a state about Ephraim, when he hears his mourning (Jer. 31:20); he is truly concerned about Abraham's generation (Hebr. 2:16). It is interesting to note that Scripture describes God's pity in terms that make it undoubtedly clear that he feels obliged in one way or another. His compassion does something to him. He is concerned and afraid: he is in a state. His compassion is, in the full sense of the word, 'com-passion'.

We now need to describe the possibility of God's affliction and suffering not only in terms of sympathy. Sympathy derives from God's love that can also reveal another aspect, namely the potential affliction of resentful love. The book Hosea has an overabundance of this. One can also talk about the sadness of the Holy Spirit (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30). The biblical message that God is the love of God implies the end of any idea of God. Whoever turns this God into a passive judge who only makes claims, interferes with the wonder of his mercy when he himself did not save his own Son, but *surrendered* himself for the sake of all (Rom. 8:32). We should not ignore this part of the text that has often been used as a key witness for a theopaschistic train of thought. God's love for the sinner did indeed cost him something! We have been bought *at an expense* (1 Cor. 6:20).

We may not approach Scripture in this regard from a preconceived wise idea concerning God's absence of suffering only then to declare it away with the statement that, in this instance, we deal with an 'anthropomorph', in the sense of a 'unique' way of speaking about God. It is notable that Scripture portrays God's mercy as one of the things that distinguishes Him decisively from man: 'I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man – the Holy One among you.' (Hos. 11:9). Whoever does not wish to take Scripture literally robs the gospel of its heart because *God's heart* can no longer be found there.

When we examine the current different forms of atheism, each one of them has to do with an urge to *replace* God. God's existence is confirmed. It is not clear and it is difficult to define obligation towards a power that is described with the usual, profane terms, and not with the loaded term 'God'. The fact that such a term is often indescribable emphasises that this is about a surrogate for God, with a fictional absoluteness. Man is viewed as being orientated towards the new (Garaudy), utopia (Bloch), self-transcending love (Gardavský), or merely towards himself and his freedom (Sartre). The substitution can also be more prosaic when, in positivism, a claim to absoluteness is ascribed to reason, healthy intellect, science, and other relevant concepts. Finally, substitution can also be 'theological' when, for example, in his contagious freedom, man substitutes Jesus for God (Van Buren). In a secularised world, such as one in which modern man



has lost sight of God, he cannot eliminate the conviction that his life is finally oriented towards a transsubjective power. This does not provide any proof of God, but for faith, this refers back to the fact that God does not leave man in peace (Rom. 1:18).

Atheism cannot be refuted with the so-called proofs of God (see Thomas Aquinas par. 1.1). In the last instance, the proofs of God do not prove 'God', but 'only the indispensability of a guarantor for our world' (my translation, MM).<sup>3</sup> A proved God is not the living God, the Father who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, but an Aristotelian prime mover who serves as a guarantee for man that his world is not based on possibility, not accidental, and not merely a conglomeration of accidentally realised possibilities. Such a guarantee does not really differ from the transsubjective power we find in more than one atheistic field. There is no main difference between Comte's unchangeable law of nature and a God who started the process of natural sciences. God is not a metaphysical greatness who is proved to be *from* the world, but He is the God who *reveals* himself to the world and whom we encounter in the physical form and history of Jesus Christ. For the naturally sinful man, the proclamation of this God is absurd (1 Cor. 1:23). Therefore, the proclamation of God in the modern secularised world does not lie in the 'convincing words of human wisdom' (1 Cor. 2:4), but in the absurdity of the preaching of the cross.

The anti-metaphysical nature of this Christian proclamation of God is not an escape from atheism's issues concerning the world and nature. On the contrary, this God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is confessed as the *Creator* of heaven and earth. Therefore, theology will always guard against the temptation, in the face of atheistic critique, to use God as an hypothesis that must declare the inexplicable in the life of man and the world. To the cost of Christianity, theologians have accommodated God in the gaps of scientific knowledge. This means that, the more man himself can explain and the more gaps he can fill, the further he pushes God back. This kind of theology can ultimately destroy itself, when it can no longer find a place for God. In the words of Bonhoeffer, God is not a stopgap ('lückenbüsser'). He has to do with total reality and must be proclaimed as such within the context of a century of secularism and disbelief.

As self-destructive as the above, instead of proclaiming *God* in a secularised world, a theology succumbs to the absorptive power of secularism, with the hope of saving something from the gospel by using the slogan: God is dead, Jesus lives! A proclamation of Jesus that is not a proclamation of God is not a proclamation of Jesus, because Jesus is the Son who entrusts himself unconditionally to his Father in heaven. In fact,

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3 O. Weber, *Grundlagen der Dogmatik, I*, Neukirchen 1959:249.



it must be stated, against any form of secularistic theology, that there is no better time for the message of *God* than the century of atheism. According to Ebeling,<sup>4</sup> those who have bread give it to those who do not have bread. The doctor visits the ill, the messenger of God visits the Godless.

We have already pointed out the postulated nature of atheism. God's proclamation to the atheist shows, without any doubt, that, in acknowledging or denying God, it is ultimately not about the theorising intellect of man. There are existential decisions. It is about a choice. We can only know God with our whole person and our whole life. To know him is to live with him.

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4 Ebeling (*Wort und Glaube*, II, Tübingen 1969:377.



## 6

# The Living God<sup>1</sup>

Willie Jonker

### 1. The Trinity doctrine in jeopardy

The liberal theology of the nineteenth century deviated especially on four points of traditional Pneumatology: (i) the godliness of the Holy Spirit was not denied, but within the framework of a pantheistic idea of identity, the Spirit of God and the spirit of the human being were seen as two sides of the same reality, which in fact meant that the Spirit of God and the spirit of the Christian community were put on an equal footing; (ii) within this context, the personal character of the Holy Spirit could not be maintained, because the Spirit was better understood as a particular quality that was specific to God and to people (creativity, consciousness, meaningful potentiality), than as the Spirit being thought of as a person; (iii) the unity between Christ and the Spirit that is taught in the New Testament, is either diminished to mean that the Spirit is the influence of Jesus acting on the spirit of the congregation, or is converted to mean that the relationship between Christ and the Spirit is merely a particularisation of the general relationship of the Spirit with all people; and iv) the teaching of the triune nature of God is either completely neglected, or wisely interpreted in the sense of the Hegelian dialectic of the Spirit, or understood in the form of a modalistic presentation of the economic Trinity doctrine as the expression of the versatility of the human experience of God (Schleiermacher).

In the twentieth century, there has been fierce reaction against this representation of affairs on the one hand, especially by Karl Barth and those of his conviction, but on the other hand, in this regard there is also a strong current in theology that can be traced to the nineteenth century. A theologian such as *Tillich*, who leans strongly towards Idealism, immediately comes to mind here. The concept of 'spirit' plays a big role in his theology. He also thinks from the point of view of the unity between God's Spirit and the spirit of man. The divine Spirit is present in all life

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1 Translated from Jonker, W. 1977. *Christus die Middelaar: Wegwysers in die Dogmatiek*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel. 12-23; and Jonker, W. 1981. *Die Gees van Christus: Wegwysers in die Dogmatiek*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel. 102-134

as the immanence of God in the reality of the world, although Tillich emphasises in a particular sense the mutual dwelling in each other of the Spirit of God and the spirit of man. The divine Spirit carries and moves the human spirit, and the human spirit is grounded in the divine Spirit. The divine Spirit could even be called the depth dimension of the human spirit, the infinite basis of the existence of the human spirit. Even if Tillich does not wish to declare that the Spirit of God and the human spirit are identical, the Spirit of God is the source of power and meaning, from which the human spirit lives and through which the human spirit can be raised on occasion to an unprecedented experience of unity with oneself, especially when it is driven out of him/herself by the divine Spirit in order to 'stand outside of him/herself' (ecstasy). On such occasions the human spirit is in the grip of the divine Spirit and it is opened up to inspiration and fulfilment with love and faith and an experience of self-transcendence. Such experiences with the divine Spirit are not limited to Christianity. This happens particularly where there are spiritual communities of people (for example, with mystics, religious groups such as Islam, humanists and even Marxists). Even if the Spirit of Christ is the norm that ought to be attached to such experiences, the divine Spirit is not at all bound to Christ. Tillich mentions the 'latent church' that is present in every place where the Spirit moves people.

What is noticeable here, is that for Tillich, the divine Spirit is not a person, but rather the power of the Unconditional which in itself also includes the basis of personality that finds expression in the human spirit. The divine Spirit and the human spirit are certainly distinguishable from each other but belong to the same reality. Within this pan-and-theistic conception of Tillich, there is no room for the traditional utterances about God or the Trinity. Tillich finds the Trinity doctrine to be confusing, but he wishes to acknowledge that there is an element of truth therein, in as far as it tries to provide an answer to the multi-faceted nature of human need.

Pannenberg also moves within this pan-and-theism school of thought. It is certainly true that Pannenberg argues at length that the Holy Spirit is a person, because the Spirit is understood by the believer as a Subject that has control over him and that is located outside of himself. It is, however, a question of whether he means more than that the believer in his experience with the Spirit is aware that he has to do with God Himself, which cannot, for his consciousness, be described in any other way than in personal terms. For Pannenberg, the Spirit is the life force and the principle of life in all that lives, and therefore also in a particular way, the creative principle of life in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Therefore He is also the power of the resurrection from the dead, of which all believers are now a part. Pannenberg uses different terminology from that of Tillich

and he thinks, in more than one respect, within a different framework, but fundamentally they are, however, related in their common acceptance of the idealistic presuppositions. In fact, he is even more radical than Tillich in his conception of the unity between the divine and the human spirit. He criticises Tillich because Tillich distinguishes too strongly between the Spirit of God and the human spirit and thus ends up stating that the human spirit can participate in the Spirit of God only in moments of ecstasy, as if the Spirit of God could be a separate dimension next to the human spirit. The human spirit is always a part of the divine Spirit, which is the force from which the human spirit lives. Pannenberg also joins Teilhard de Chardin, who understands the Spirit as the energy behind the evolutionary process that reaches out to the point of Omega, although he does also criticise Teilhard on certain technical points. In any case, Pannenberg rejects emphatically the idea that the Spirit of God must only be understood soteriologically or that the Spirit must relate in a particular sense to man's intellect or his ability to understand. The basic function of the Spirit is the healing and strengthening of the forces of natural life, that are in all respects dependent upon God and that remain open to Him. The soteriological task of the Spirit is to make people aware of the life of the Spirit and in this way to ensure that they participate in this life to a greater extent. In the church, the creative forces of the human spirit are healed and increased by the knowledge of the life and the fate of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, Pannenberg also moves within this framework. His relationship with Hegel is clear in his point of view that the existence of God is closely involved in the history of the creation. Pannenberg can even say that, although God is not, in the strictest sense, dependent upon the world, He does nevertheless wish to actualise himself freely in the history of the world, by means of the incarnation and in the activities of the Holy Spirit. This means that Pannenberg has a tendency to move in the direction of an economic Trinity doctrine. However, he does this in an unusual way, because he begins with the statement that the truth can always only first be known 'at the end', by which it appears that what is visible at the end has always been, as it is known to be. In this way, God will only be properly recognised as He is when He is resurrected from the dead, but then it will also be clear that He has always been the same as He is when He is resurrected from the dead. In light of this, it can also be said that we learn to know God, in a historical sense, as the Trinity (through Jesus Christ and the actions of the Spirit), but when the full reality of this becomes visible at the end, it will also be clear that this had to have been so in the eternity of God. In this way, Pannenberg takes the trouble to retain the traditional terminology in

relation to the doctrine of the Trinity, although within the framework of his wisdom, everything takes on a new content.

We find the most outspoken proponents of a pan-and-theistic interpretation of the Christian faith in the so-called *process theology*. The basic idea of process thought is that everything is in a continual process of becoming. God is understood as the world-soul, the consciousness of the universe, His relationship with the world more or less comparable to the human soul or spirit to its body. As such, God is Himself an organism within the sphere of space and time, involved in the process of growth which is the result of his connection to the world reality, in which He constantly has new experiences through that which is happening. Because God can be understood as the consciousness of everything that happens, and because man with his own consciousness is part of the consciousness of God, which is an occurrence itself, man is enabled not only to know the world as it is, but also to know God in and behind the world without any particular revelation. Therefore the world, and in particular, mankind, in a sense, takes up in process thought the same place that the Son takes in relation to the Father in traditional Christian doctrine. Through his essential relationship to God, mankind is deified, and he has no need of any revelation from outside. He is God's revelation and can of himself take part in the consciousness of God. At the same time it can also be said that the spirit of man takes the place of the Spirit of God in the traditional Christian doctrine, because man has, through his spirit, a direct share in the knowledge of God.

There is no more room here for the personality of the Spirit or even for the traditional Trinity doctrine. The entire world history is understood as a process of incarnation and the Holy Spirit is interpreted as the immanence of God in the whole world. For the Trinity doctrine, comprehension at most can be offered as an attempt to give expression to the reality of God's involvement in human history and in the universe. And yet, with this, it is completely reversed, and often also opposed. Instead of this, one could rather talk about a bipolarity in God, in other words, that on the one hand, God is primordial in Himself as God, and on the other hand, He is connected to the world. The 'transcendence' and the 'immanence' of God do not need to find expression in the concept of a trinity in God, but can be better understood if one begins from the premise that God is the *one* personal God who is in the most profound way involved with the world. Actually, it is more plausible for the process theologians to talk about the incarnation of the Spirit than that of the Son. Jesus is understood as the *only* person in whom the true immanence of the Spirit finds its focus point. The process theologian fully supports a Spirit-Christology, in terms of which the divine nature of Christ is interpreted as the presence of the Spirit in

Him. Upon occasion, process theologians have also expressed the opinion that Christianity has now arrived in an after-Christianity stage, because the emphasis today is no longer on Christianity as a religion of salvation, but rather on Christianity as a religion of creativity (Maynard Kaufman). Furthermore, in circles other than that of the process theologians, we hear about the Spirit speaking in a manner that strongly recalls the 19th century. Lampe understands the term 'Spirit' as an indication of God who makes himself known to man in a continuous history of incarnation in the human spirit. He finds the idea of the incarnation of the Second Person of the divine Trinity unnecessary. At best, what can be said about Jesus is that He is the archetype and even the source of the new life of the Spirit of God in the spirit of man. The Spirit Himself is also no separate 'hypostasis' in God, but simply an indication of the immanence of God Himself in the human spirit.

Perhaps less sagacious, but still related to what we have heard here, Hendrikus Berkhof also says that the Holy Spirit should not be understood as a separate 'person' in God, but simply as an appellation of God Himself in his 'acting' presence. The Spirit in the Scriptures is, according to Berkhof, not an autonomous Being next to God the Father and Christ, but a predicate to God and Christ, meant to describe the fact and manner of their activities in the world.

Therefore, Berkhof wishes rather to discard the appellation of the Holy Spirit as a 'person'. In his view, in the naming of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, it is not about three persons in the modern sense of the word (a concept that must necessarily lead to tri-theism) and also not about the three *hypostases* or independent entities within the one being of God, but about the *one* movement of the *one* God in creation and recreation which cannot be expressed in any other way than by these three names. God is only *one* person, but He meets with us in the Son and in the Spirit of the Son. By this, Berkhof does not mean that the Spirit is impersonal – not an impersonal power in any event – because the Spirit is still God Himself whom we meet as the personal God. The Spirit is, however, not a person next to the Father. At most, one can say that the Spirit is a person in his relationship to us, but not in his relationship to God.

In his explanation, Berkhof leans strongly on H. Wheeler Robinson, who followed the same route in his well-known 1928 work, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*. His thought is also related to that of H. P. van Dusen (in his book: *Spirit, Son and Father*, 1958) and that of Ingo Hermann (*Kyrios und Pneuma*, 1961). In all three it is about the fact that the Spirit is simply understood as a different name for God Himself, or for the being of God. Together with Hermann, Berkhof does not only

reject the personal character of the Spirit, but also speaks of a dynamic identity or an experiential identity of Christ and the Spirit. This leads him to the conclusion that it is much more biblical to replace the traditional Logos-Christology with a Pneuma-Christology, which means that it is the presence of the Spirit in and through Christ that makes him the Son of God. In the same way, it also leads him to the conclusion that the Spirit must be understood as the Spirit of Christ, as the acting power of the glorified Christ. Even if Berkhof does not wish to talk in all respects about an identity of the glorified Christ and the Spirit, it is nevertheless clear that he also does not want to see the Spirit as a person next to Christ, just as he does not want to see the Spirit as a person 'next to' the Father.

This, however, means that Berkhof must abandon the Trinity doctrine, as we have already seen in the case of Wheeler Robinson. As he himself formulates it, he can no longer see the Trinity doctrine as a description of the 'structure of God', but rather as a description of the structure of the covenant. The three names, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are a summary description of the covenant that was carried out between God and mankind, and in which the Son and the Spirit were decisively involved. One would actually be inclined to say that Berkhof's conception of the Trinity comes down to a dual action of the Spirit of God in Christ and in the believers. But with that, he opted for a modalistic conception of the Trinity, as is also clear from his sympathy for Marcellus of Ancyra.

There are noticeable similarities between the viewpoint of Berkhof and that of J. D. G. Dunn. Dunn also opts for a Pneuma-Christology and says that the deity of Jesus Christ was nothing other than a function of the Holy Spirit. In regard to the glorification of Christ, he also starts from the fact that believers experience Christ and the Spirit as a unity. This means that the Spirit, who is impersonal in Himself and can hardly be distinguished from the Logos before the incarnation, is received by the personality of Jesus. The Spirit comes to us through the funnel of the glorified Christ and is stamped by the personality of Jesus. Because of this, Dunn also has serious questions with the traditional Trinity doctrine, even if he, as a New-Testament scholar, expounds less fully on this than Berkhof himself does.

## 2. The Trinity doctrine in the foreground

In his reaction to the theology of the nineteenth century, Karl Barth follows another radical path. Against the Idealism and identity thought in all of its forms, he emphasises very strongly the qualitative distinction between God and man. God is God, and it is madness to think that we can talk about God just by talking in a higher tone of voice about man and his



experiences. God is not obviously present in our religious consciousness, spiritual depth or moral situation, because He transcends all of this and even stands against all of this. God can only really be met when He, as the Wholly Different, the Everlasting and Unending, meets us without, in such a meeting, ceasing to be what He is in Himself. Knowledge of God can only come into existence when God Himself conveys his Word 'directly from above' and also ensures that man is able to hear it. Even then, the Word still remains inalienably God's Word, which cannot be locked up in human words or thoughts, but which must be spoken by God again and again. There is no continuity between God and man (as is proposed in the Roman Catholic understanding of the syn-analogy or *analogia entis*) through which man can come to a knowledge of God outside the actual revelation of God. Only when and where it suits God does the Word of God that has touched time and history in Jesus Christ become audible to man in the 'eternal moment' of God's liberal speech. Although Barth emphasises very strongly in his first period that this Word of God is the Word of God's judgement on man with his pride, self-satisfaction, morality and religiosity, it was still clear from the beginning that it was at the same time also the Word of God's *mercy*. In the moment of meeting with this Word, faith is called upon in man as an answer, through which man casts himself upon the promises of God.

The position taken by Barth is that faith is not a general human possibility as was proposed during the nineteenth century, but rather a wonder and a deed of God that came into being through the revelation of God. For this reason, all theology must keep itself busy with the revelation of God, and not with the subjective conditions and experiences of man. This revelation of God is Christ Jesus, and we receive notice of this through the Holy Spirit. In 1927, Barth published his so-called 'Prolegomena', in which he tried to explore the way that the Word should be followed by an authentic theology of the Word, and he spells out especially that theology must start with the fact that God revealed himself in Christ, and with the reality that that revelation is received through the faith that is worked by the Holy Spirit. In the self-revelation of God to mankind, three specific moments are identifiable: God makes *Himself* as the Lord, known to man; He does this in *Jesus Christ*; and He makes *Himself known to man through the Holy Spirit*. These three moments are linked to the fact that God is triune: as the Father He reveals himself; He does this in Jesus Christ, his son; and He makes *Himself known to man through the Holy Spirit* as the 'subjective reality and possibility' of the revelation of God allowing man to share in the knowledge of the self-revelation of God. God can only be known through God. We also have to do with an act of God Himself in man's knowledge of God. Barth therefore wishes to recount the revelation

of God in none other than Trinitarian terms. This means that for Barth, the Trinity doctrine is not only in the foreground, but can be seen even as the short understanding of the entire dogma. Different from Schleiermacher, who places the Trinity doctrine right at the end of the doctrine of faith, Barth places it right at the beginning of his dogma. The God of the Bible is the triune God, because He is the living God who has revealed Himself to man.

By taking his point of departure in Trinity doctrine in this way, Barth made room from the beginning for the deity of the Holy Spirit and for the own task of the Spirit in the meeting of God with mankind. One of Barth's greatest points of criticism against Roman Catholicism and neo-Protestantism, but later also against existential theology, is precisely because they did not allow the Holy Spirit to come into its own. For that reason they had to construct in an unlawful manner a continuity between God and man that could serve as the basis for the community between God and man, while it is still, according to Scripture, the Holy Spirit that establishes this community. During the course of the development of Barth's own theology, there is still more stated about the Holy Spirit. Whereas, in his early periods, there was often a fear that he left little room in his theological framework for the Holy Spirit and the work of the Holy Spirit; and whereas even later it was said that Barth could not offer sufficient space to the Holy Spirit because of his concentration on Christology, it does nevertheless seem that he certainly wanted to give a great deal of attention to the Holy Spirit within his theological thinking. It is, however, true that, within his frame of thought, he could do this only in a particular way, and in fact in such a way that the Holy Spirit can be seen as connected with Christ in the most intimate way.

The most notable characteristic of Barth's theological thought is its Christocentrism. In the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, he worked out his foundational concept from various different points of view, that Jesus Christ is the actualisation and the realisation in time and history of the eternal decision of God, to be the God of mankind and God-with-mankind. Barth has a dynamic concept of God, in contradiction to the static concept of God found in scholastic thought. He understands the being of God not as a passive being, but as a being-in-action, or also, as *being* in a continual state of becoming, *being* thus seen as a continual occurrence. This is what Barth understands by the 'Geschichlichkeit' of God, the suitability of his being. In terms that remind one of existential philosophy, Barth can present God's being as God's own voluntary decision. In the occurrence of God's freely-done self-determination, He actualises Himself as a person. As the living God, God lives through a history, the history of his freedom. Out of pure love, God thus 'destined' himself and made the choice to be the

God of mankind. God's voluntary primal decision (*Gnadenwahl*) was his decision to be merciful to man in Christ Jesus. With this decision, which is at the commencement of all of God's works with man, God identified himself irrevocably with man, so that God can never again be without man, and man can never again be without God. In Christ, God and man are ontically together in an unbreakable unity. Because mankind, with whom God identifies Himself in this way, is the sinner, it means that this choice of God to be the God of mankind implies that God chose death for Himself (because death is the wage of sin) and life for mankind. Thus the cross of Christ is the gift of the self-sacrifice of God, already entered into the eternal decision of God about Himself and about man. This is the price of sin and the judgement over the darkness. This judgement and death, however, at the same time mean both life and the light for man: in Christ Jesus man is raised from the dead and elevated as God's obedient ally. In Christ, the total victory over sin and death is an accomplished fact. Because the whole of humanity is included in Christ, the salvation that is present in Christ is the salvation of the entire humanity and the whole world. Although it is still hidden and will come to revelation only eschatologically at first, the triumph of God's mercy in Christ Jesus is already a *fait accompli* that cannot be frustrated or undone by anyone or anything.

It is this eternal reality that is brought to the knowledge of mankind by the Holy Spirit. According to Barth, the Holy Spirit is God Himself in his revelation to man, God himself as He makes Himself and salvation in Christ known to man. Barth can understand the entire history of salvation as the revelation of God. The incarnation of the Word and the outpouring of the Spirit are in reality two moments in the outward revelation in time of what God in his eternal primal decision has already decided about Himself and man. As the manifest being of what the eternal Word of God in Christ is, the Spirit is simply the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit unlocks man for the knowledge of God. He makes what in Christ is the reality of man, subjectively his own. Without the Holy Spirit there is no knowledge of God that is possible. Through the Holy Spirit, however, there is no other knowledge of God than the knowledge of God in Christ. After all, the Spirit has no task other than to convey what is eternally already a reality in Christ, both noetically and applicatively, in man's consciousness and existence. This means that Barth sees the Holy Spirit in the closest possible unity with Christ. Although he does not use the expression that Christ and the Holy Spirit are identical with each other, as we have heard before from Ingo Hermann and others, it is also clear that Barth distinguishes between Christ and the Spirit only as two moments in the one action of God's self-revelation. In addition, it is undeniable that Barth, as a result of his Christocentrism, consistently gives Christ a certain priority over

the Spirit. Everything in his doctrine centres on Christ. Therefore, in Barth's formulations, the Holy Spirit is also the Man of the glorified Christ through which He subjectively communicates to man what is objectively a reality in Himself. All emphasis falls upon Christ's presence in the present. Undoubtedly, in this, Barth joins J. C. Blumhardt, who practised his pastorate in the conviction that the living Christ himself is present and active in his Spirit, so that in a certain sense it can be said that the Spirit is none other than the risen and mighty Lord Jesus Christ himself. In any case, the glorified Jesus is the subject of the Spirit for Barth, and for him also, the Spirit is the second mode of Christ's parousia.

This complete unity between Christ and the Spirit obviously also goes hand in hand with Barth's conception of the Trinity. Although Barth takes as the starting point of his Trinity doctrine the revelation of God in Christ and through the Spirit, that is, in the economic Trinity, he is still very outspoken about the fact that God is eternal in Himself as He reveals Himself in time. God has been the Three-in-one from eternity. Behind the economic Trinity is the Trinity of Beings. If this were not so, God would have been dependent on history for the unfolding of His being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (as Hegel wanted), or the Trinity of God would have had to be understood in a modalistic way (the way in which we know God), while in His own essence, He is most likely not like that (the direction in which Schleiermacher moved). Nevertheless, even though Barth also supports very strongly the fact that God in Himself has been triune from eternity, he leaves absolutely no ambiguity about the fact that Father, Son and Spirit are one. The mere fact that he (originally in relation to Augustine and Calvin) has a problem with the concept of persons in the doctrine of the Trinity and he prefers to speak of these 'ways of being' of God, just as he also says that God repeats himself three times in his 'ways of being' – as Father, Son and Spirit – shows how important the unity of God is for him. Barth would like to make the concept of 'person' applicable to the triune God rather than separately to the three ways of being of God. The three ways of being are defined by him as three moments in the one act of God's revelation which, for Barth, coincides with the essence of God.

It is no wonder that Barth has been accused several times of being 'modalistic' in his conception of the Trinity. The reason behind the accusation is the belief that Barth does not bring out the independence of each of the three divine Persons clearly enough. This criticism comes mainly from those who tend more towards the direction of a common conception of the trinity of God, in which a strong emphasis is placed on the fact that in God there really are three distinct and independent Persons who together constitute the one Being of God. These people are of the opinion that Barth, just like Karl Rahner, thinks too much from the point

of view of the unity of God and then tries to reconcile this with the trinity of God's revelation – an approach that is typical of Western theology since Augustine. Out of fear of tri-theism, they move too closely into the neighbourhood of modalism. In contradiction to this, they would much rather begin from the trinity of God's revelation and ask how these three Persons can be one in essence, and indeed in such a way that the danger of tri-theism can be avoided. It is clear that this kind of thinking would like especially to put the emphasis on the Trinity of Revelation and therefore also on the fact of God entering into and involvement in history, without wanting to deny that there is also such a thing as a Trinity of Being. Apart from a number of theologians from the Anglo-Saxon world and someone like Thielieke, who proposes these kinds of views without giving evidence of much philosophical influence, one may think here especially of Jürgen Moltmann, in whom the influence of Hegel is very clear, and of Roman Catholic theologians such as Heribert Mühlen, Juan Luis Segundo, and Joseph Bracken among others, some of whom openly look for association with American process thinking. In the 'community approach' of the Trinity, the Eastern tradition is approached, rather than the Western tradition. The main emphasis is not on the numerical unity of God, but on the unity of love and fellowship that exists between the three divine Persons, which is comparable to the unity of purpose, love and fellowship between a man and a woman, in spite of their being two people. Heribert Mühlen in particular makes much of the unity of communion between the three divine Persons and then says that the Holy Spirit is actually the Deity of God, the divine unity in person, the one Person who exists in the two Persons of the Father and the Son (and he also uses the image of a child who is also the unity-in-person of the father and mother who jointly create him).

The accusation that Barth thinks modalistically is, however, not so easy to prove. The term 'modalism' may have different nuances in meaning. Barth is no modalist in the sense in which Schleiermacher suggests, with his view that man projects the idea of a trinity onto God from his experience with God. For that, he emphasises the Trinity of Being too strongly. If what is meant by the accusation is that Barth does not maintain the personal independence of the Father, Son and Spirit side by side, then it is a question whether this criticism does not actually affect the entire Western tradition since Augustine. Although Barth uses more dynamic terms to express the distinction between Father, Son and Spirit than has traditionally been the case, he quite evidently does not mean to ignore the differences. One would in any case not be able to conclude, from the way Barth talks about the Holy Spirit, that he would agree with Berkhof that the Holy Spirit is more or less just another name for God in his active

presence. Without any doubt, the Holy Spirit is for Barth a third way of seeing God that is distinct from his ways of seeing Him as the Father and as the Son. It is true that Barth does not want to speak of the Holy Spirit as a separate 'individual personality' next to the Father and the Son and that in any case he has no room for the community representation of the Trinity. In this, however, he remains within the Western tradition.

One sometimes gets the impression that the accusation of modalism directed at Barth means more than criticism against what is felt to be a specific static element in Barth's concept of God, despite his great emphasis on the 'Geschichtlichkeit' of God. Moltmann especially holds it against Barth that the Trinity for Barth would amount to a 'closed circle in heaven', while he himself would prefer to think of it as an event on earth. With this, he opts for a representation of the Trinity that offers room for the involvement of God in history in the sense that God is, so to speak, first constituted in history and what happens to Himself in it, rather than the Trinity. In any case, this is his position in *Der gekreuzigte Gott*. Although he comes back to this extreme formulation in his later works, the trend of his thinking is still clear: he wants to treat the doctrine of the Trinity as the hermeneutic tool for understanding the biblical message of God entering into the history of human suffering. He wants to think more radically dynamically than Barth does, and therefore aligns himself more closely with Hegel than with Barth. Although he therefore recognises in his later works, such as in *Kirche in der Kraft des Geistes*, that behind the economic Trinity there is also an Essence Trinity (otherwise we would not know whether we are really with God Himself in the cross and in the work of the Spirit), he wants to hold very strongly to the fact that God is not in Himself a closed and perfect being who is in no way 'open' to development and influence through history. The Trinity of glorification will be different from the Trinity of origin. In the course of his history with the world, God takes up the creation in his glory through the mission of the Son and the Spirit, so that the end will be much more than the beginning. It seems that Moltmann moves in this way in the direction of the pan- and -theistic conceptions that we also find in Process theology. His acceptance of a community conception in connection with the unity of the trinitarian God is subservient to the eschatological expectation that in the Son and the Spirit the entire created reality will at last be freed and absorbed into the unity of God.

Such thoughts are also found in Jüngel, who is far less critical of Barth than Moltmann and Pannenberg are, but still goes much further than Barth does in his association with Hegel. Where Barth thought from the concept of revelation in his doctrine of the Trinity, and therefore understood the economic Trinity as the disclosure of what previously existed eternally in



God (in which the static element of the eternally constant being of God is present), Jüngel thinks from the point of view of love as the essence of God. However, in the process of God's self-sacrifice in love, there is a growth and an increase in love, and exactly this happens in God's dealings with man and the world in the unfolding of the economic Trinity when God enters into history. Thus God's being itself is involved in a process of change and enrichment. There are undoubtedly important differences between Jüngel and Moltmann as theologians, just as there are also important differences between them and Pannenberg and Berkhof. It does, however, seem as if there is a connecting factor that means that they are all, despite differences in emphases and points of view, inclined to move in the same direction. This is the strong emphasis on the involvement of God in history and the meaning it has not only for man and the world, but also for God himself. This means that a search is made for a representation of the Trinity that makes room for God's entry into history and for everything, including Himself, that is connected with it. Somewhere, Barth is the origin of this movement in the thinking, because his emphasis on the *Geschichtlichkeit* of God is probably the inspiring factor behind this development. The accusation of modalism that is sometimes levelled against him is then meant only to say that even Barth's understanding of the *Geschichtlichkeit* of God still contained too many static elements.

### 3. Relative independence of the Holy Spirit?

The question of whether Barth succeeds in giving the Holy Spirit its own character and task within the Trinity of God is focused on the question of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Christ. From his Christological concentration, Barth allows the work of the Spirit to merge into the noetical and applicative realisation of the salvation that is present in Christ. In the earlier parts of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* ('KD'), one gets the impression that the Spirit simply performs a mediating function with a view to generating the faith through which the revelation in Christ is recognised and accepted. In the later sections, however, it becomes clear that Barth understands, by the revelation that takes place in Christ, nothing less than the total realisation of salvation in all of humanity and in all creation. This means that he understands and paints the Holy Spirit as the presence and activity of Jesus Christ Himself, in a certain sense the extended arm of Christ or Christ Himself in the power of his resurrection, which is the revelation of the triumph of God's grace carried out in the reality of the whole world (KD IV/2:360ff.). For Barth, the Holy Spirit is the power of the glorified Christ that produces the full meaning of the reconciliation. For him, there is a clear analogy between the work He performs in relation to the human nature of Christ, and the work He performs in relation to all of humanity.

According to Barth, the Holy Spirit is the bond that connects humanity and the Deity of Christ. Because the humanity of Christ is nothing but the flesh, the old humanity, the Holy Spirit must cleanse and purify the humanity of Christ and make it obedient so that His humanity can reflect the full glory of God. The Holy Spirit now performs exactly the same task in the rest of humanity. There is nothing that the Spirit has done to the humanity of Christ that He will not also do to the rest of the human race, so that all of mankind will eventually display the image of the Son. What the Spirit did when He united the human nature of Jesus with the eternal Word of God in the virgin birth, He does in an analogous way when He assumes the totality of the human race in unity with the Son of God. Thus the incarnation becomes a prototype of faith. Humanity as such, received by grace, shares in the unity with God that Christ as the Son possesses by nature (cf. Rosato: *Karl Barth's Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 151ff.).

The critical question that is being asked from different sides, however, is whether Barth does not let the Spirit get completely absorbed in his involvement with Christ. Doesn't the Spirit have an own function and meaning that is distinct from Christ, or is He completely 'subordinate' to Christ and only definable through Christ? It is true that Barth says that what the Spirit does in the union of the Deity and humanity of Christ, and what He then does in an analogous way in the union of all humanity with God in Christ, is the same as what He does as a bond of love between the Father and the Son in the immanent Trinity. With this, therefore, he defines the function of the Spirit in broader terms than only from the viewpoint of Christ. This does not, however, diminish the fact that even then the attention remains completely focused on Christ, because the most important thing that Barth can say about God is that He is the human God whose primal decision it was to be the God of the people. It is no wonder that the reproach of 'Christomonism' has come up again and again in connection with Barth. And the reproach of Christomonism also points to the fact that the Spirit has no content of its own other than in Christ.

It is well known that the spiritualist groups throughout the centuries, from Montanus to the modern Pentecostal movement, always try to accentuate the own meaning of the Spirit next to Christ. For them, the Spirit is not only the instrument of Christ or the power through which He works in the world, but a Person in his own right who has his own initiative and adds something to what happened in Christ by carrying it further and greater to do works as Christ did (John 14:12). The outpouring of the Spirit is understood as a new fact of salvation together with the cross and resurrection of Christ, which ushers in a new era. The Spirit is a separate reality in God with whom a separate relationship and communion is possible, admittedly only on the basis of Christ's work of salvation



and therefore mediated by Christ, but still something more than just the relationship to Christ. In Eastern theology also, the Holy Spirit is assigned its own meaning next to Christ. In connection with the discussion around the *filioque*, Eastern theology repeatedly accuses the West of binding the Spirit too exclusively to the Son and making too little of the Spirit's own scope, which just like Christ, has its origin in the Father and so it is, so to speak, a second arm of the Father with which He draws the world to Him, and is not (as Barth would say) just the arm of Christ. The Roman Catholic theologian Rosato expresses this criticism of Barth by saying that his theology is stamped too exclusively by the *filioque* and not sufficiently by the *a patre*, by means of which Barth's Pneumatology becomes a function of Christology and has no meaning of its own.

It is remarkable that the sharpest monologue against Barth on this point comes from the reformed theologian A. A. van Ruler. As a young theologian, Van Ruler was profoundly influenced by Barth and a first Christological phase can also be distinguished in his theology. Little by little, however, he defended himself more and more consistently against Barth's 'Christomonism', and this in particular also affects the way in which Barth relates Christ and the Holy Spirit to each other. Van Ruler wants to ensure that full justice is done to the own meaning and 'relative independence' of the Holy Spirit next to and opposite Christ. Therefore he wants to understand the Spirit not only as the Spirit of Christ, but also as the Spirit of the Father and the Son. When the New Testament calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Christ, he believes it is not to identify the Spirit with Christ, as Barth does, but actually, quite the opposite, because it is the Spirit who 'poses' the Messiah and makes of Him what He is. Berkhof distinguishes between two ways in which the relationship between Christ and the Spirit is presented in the New Testament: on the one hand (especially in the synoptic Gospels) the Spirit is presented 'als hebbende een goddelijke prioriteit boven Jezus, en Jezus also de drager van die Geest'; and on the other hand (especially in Paul and John), Christ is presented as the One who sends the Spirit and who 'has' the Spirit. According to Berkhof, the first point of view (Jesus as bearer of the Spirit) has been particularly neglected by the church and traditional theology, while it has been brought to the fore by the adoptionists, the free-spirited Protestants (and we can add: spiritualism) (cf. *De Leer van de Heilige Geest*, 17ff.). If we deal with this framework of the double point of view of the relationship between Christ and the Spirit, we will have to say that Barth especially places the second point of view in the foreground: for him the Spirit is the extended arm of Christ, and Christ completely possesses the Spirit. Van Ruler, on the other hand, wants to call attention to the first point of view, that it is the Spirit that 'poses' the Messiah and validates

him for his work of service. This means that Van Ruler (like Berkhof in fact, even though there are big differences between the two) assigns a certain 'divine priority' to the Spirit above the Messiah.

The *filioque* is not contested by Van Ruler, but it is considered to be of less importance. He tends to relate the Spirit more directly to the Father than to Christ and likes to formulate it in such a way that the Spirit as God's eschatological gift that is poured out from the end is primarily related to the Kingdom of God and that his relationship to Christ actually goes over to his relationship to the Kingdom of God: Christ is the Messiah through whom the Kingdom will come, and therefore the Spirit has to do with Him. Van Ruler also says that the work of the Spirit is more comprehensive than the work of Christ, because the work of reconciliation through Christ is performed only once, while the work of the Spirit spans the ages and gives its expansion to the Kingdom of the Messiah. Admittedly, he says that the Spirit, just like the Messiah, should be considered as an 'intermezzo', a necessary interlude for the sake of sin, and that both the Son and the Spirit will once again return in God himself when the Kingdom is handed over to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24). It is clear, however, that he assigns a wider task to the Spirit than to Christ, because it is the Spirit that drives the renewal work of the Messiah into human life and thus prepares for the eschaton, the day on which God and His creation will stand to face each other without any mediation. Everything ultimately boils down to this for Van Ruler, because this is God's eschatological purpose. For God it is about man, not about the Messiah or the Spirit. Christ is not the sense of history (as Berkhof believes), but man is the sense of history. Van Ruler can specifically formulate that everything in the Bible *revolves around* Christ, but that deep down it is not all *about* Christ. For God, it is ultimately about the Empire, about the world, about creation. In this connection, the Spirit plays a role that cannot be defined solely from the role of the Messiah. It has its own meaning that must be fully respected, because in the end it is the Spirit that connects creation and consummation and thus allows God to be everything and in everyone.

In this connection, Van Ruler's conception of the difference between the Christological and the pneumatological structure in theological thought must also be mentioned. Everything Christ does, he believes, eliminates the activity of man. In contrast, man can only stand by passively and receive it. This applies, for example, to the vicarious suffering of Christ and the reconciliation He brought about between God and man. Christ's work also bears the character of finality. In it, all was decided about man, and he was dealt with once and for all.

However, when it comes to the pneumatological aspects of salvation, man is again fully involved, with his full responsibility. In Christ, man is involved only in the form of an impersonal human nature (the anhypostasis). However, in Pneumatology, the human being is included as a person. Then, Van Ruler believes, there must even be talk of a 'theonomic reciprocity' between God and man, and he dares to say that one can even speak of 'one hundred percent synergism' here, because man must cooperate fully with the Spirit of God in the appropriation of salvation. From this it would also be possible to explain why the work of the Spirit in man always has a flawed character and remains a torso in contrast to the finality of Christ's work, because man is involved in it in his stubbornness and carnal nature (*Structuurverschillen*, Theol. Werk I:175ff.). The intention of these bold expressions of Van Ruler is not to advocate synergism in the old, well-known meaning that the word has in soteriology, but to give expression to the own nature and character of the work of the Spirit in distinction from that of Christ.

Van Ruler has no trouble accepting the immanent Trinity, but he does not have much to say about it. What interests him more is what he calls the 'spread' in the Trinity. By this he means that each of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit has a different task. The result is that he emphasises the diversity of the three Persons more than he emphasises their unity. With this, he moves in the direction of the Eastern tradition because, in his thinking, there are, in fact, other points of contact with Greek thought in regard to the Spirit. As a criticism against Van Ruler, it has been mentioned that in response to Barth's Christomonism, he leans heavily towards a Patrocentrism or even a Patromonism, because the Kingdom is so central to his thinking, and since the Kingdom is the Kingdom of the Father (at least eschatologically), this means that the Father is central throughout his theology. Others again have asked the question of whether he does not open the door to spiritualism and mysticism when he places so much emphasis on the independence of the Spirit next to and even opposite to Christ. The question is not taken completely out of the blue when one thinks of Van Ruler's love for the Closer Reformation and the mystical pull in the piety of the movement. In his last years, however, Van Ruler became increasingly critical of both mysticism and the revolutionary trends in theology, which in his opinion were connected with a 'baptist' climate that was beginning to gain the upper hand in theology. It is as if Van Ruler then drew back from certain possibilities that could lie locked up by implication in the direction in which his own thinking about the independence of the Spirit moved. However, his thinking never came to a complete conclusion.

That Van Ruler talks about a certain 'spreading' in the Trinity and believes that both the Messiah and the Holy Spirit will once again return

in God himself is linked to an attempt on his part to drop the emphasis on the economic Trinity in contrast to such an emphasis on the Trinity of Being, that the diversity of the work of the Father, the Son and the Spirit does not properly come into view. We see this tendency quite often in the newer theology which is coming to the fore. Berkouwer points out that, long before Karl Rahner made his famous statement that the economic Trinity is the Essence Trinity, Noordmans had already said more or less the same thing, just in other words. Also, the intention of Noordmans is to think from the view of the economic Trinity and thus bring to the fore the diversity in the outward works of God (creation, salvation and re-creation) rather than their unity. This leads also to his emphasising, more strongly than Barth does, the unique nature of the work of the Holy Spirit as distinct from the work of Christ.

Noordmans is less inclined than Van Ruler to make Pneumatology independent of Christology. He also maintains the *filioque* more clearly than Van Ruler does. Still, he wants to give the Spirit a certain 'room to play', which means that his Pneumatology does not become a function of Christology like that of Barth. The most striking aspect of his Pneumatology, and the point at which he is farthest from Barth, is the way in which he understands the Holy Spirit as the interpreter of Christ in his early work *Gestalte en Geest*. According to him, it is typical of the Holy Spirit that in history He erects figures that are used by Him as instruments in the service of salvation, but that He always breaks the figures down again when they are no longer suitable for their service. So it was with the kingship in Israel, but so it is also with the Messiah himself, with the apostolate and with all figures of the New Covenant.

The Spirit does take out what belongs to Christ and shares it with the church throughout the ages, but it always happens according to the pattern that forms that were once built up and used are broken down and rebuilt in the translation and interpretation work of the Spirit, so that the continuity between Christ and the forms that are built after Him in history will not be clear to everyone, only to the spiritual man. The Holy Spirit – in continuity with Christ – really does new things in history. For example, the Spirit leaves behind the apostolate of the Twelve and calls Paul as an instrument of the Spirit to build the bridge to the heathens. The four Gospels are 'displaced' by the letters of Paul, and so forth. Thus the Spirit bends and conjugates again and again the revelation of God in Christ in new forms throughout the ages. In this way there is room for the Holy Spirit to play against Christ, and although it is Noordmans's intention that the new forms can always be measured against the yardstick of the earthly and glorified Christ, it is clear that in his Pneumatology there is room for a vision of the freedom of the Spirit that makes him particularly

interesting for theologians, who especially like to understand the work of the Spirit as the cultivation of the history of liberation. It would be possible to connect Moltmann and Noordmans in a certain way through the idea that the Spirit is the future-creating, life-giving Spirit that fills history with a revolutionary élan.

There is probably not a single Christian theologian who will not confess that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. However, it is clear that there are differences regarding the way in which this should be understood. In the various attempts to defend a 'relative independence' of the Spirit vis-à-vis Christ, it is not about the denial of the bond between Christ and the Spirit, but about the desire to give the work of the Spirit wider dimensions as only the mediation between Christ and the believers. However, the question remains whether until now a way has been found to express this, without falling into some form of spiritualism that weakens the bond between Christ and the Spirit.

#### 4. Guidelines

When we have to determine the course of our own thinking in relation to the present discussion in the light of the Scriptures, there are a few things that are of decisive significance to us:

##### The Holy Spirit

(i) The Holy Spirit is consistently associated with God Himself in the Scriptures, so that it can be said that the Holy Spirit is God himself in his revealing, self-communicating and acting presence. In the Old Testament, the power of creation is attributed to the Spirit of God in numerous places, as well as the granting of all kinds of extraordinary gifts and powers to people, the inspiration of the prophets and the spiritual renewal of the people of God. In addition, it is clear throughout that what is thus attributed to the Spirit of God is essentially said of God himself. Sometimes the term 'Spirit of God' can indeed refer to the 'inside' of God (Isa. 40:13; Isa. 30:1), or also to the presence of God from which no man can escape (Ps. 139:7–10). In certain cases, it also becomes clear that the Spirit is simply a parallel expression for the 'I' of God (Isa. 63:10ff.; Ps. 51:13; Hag. 2:4 – 5). The Spirit belongs to God as his hand, his word, and his voice belong to Him. It is not 'something' next to God that can be thought of as apart from Himself, but God Himself in His active presence.

We also find this equating of the Spirit with God Himself in the New Testament. There are obviously all kinds of differences between the Old and the New Testament in their statements about the Spirit. The New Testament presupposes in more than one respect the developments

surrounding the representation of the Spirit as it occurred in the inter-testament periods. This includes, among other things, the stronger tendency towards hypostatisation of the Spirit and a clearer distinction between the Spirit of God and the good and bad spirits that are created. However, regarding the fact that in the Spirit we really have to do with God himself, there is no difference. In the communications regarding the conception of Christ (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35), the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:13–17), the filling of Jesus with the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:40; 4:1, 14, 18; 11:20; Acts 10:37–38 etc.) and the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2, cf. Joel 2), it is clear that we are dealing with a way of speaking about the Holy Spirit which is fully in accordance with the way in which the Spirit is also spoken about in the Old Testament. The Spirit is simply the power of God himself in his creative, uplifting, miracle-working and redemptive activity, the way in which God intervenes in human life and in history. Between God and the Spirit no distinction can be made, because the Spirit is, in the New Testament as well as in the Old, the Spirit of God himself.

(ii) The Bible does not think pantheistically in any way at all. The Spirit of God is therefore not thought of as the connecting element between God and the world. The representation of the Spirit as a sort of divine fluid by means of which the world is permeated, and God and man are connected to each other, is foreign to both the Old and the New Testament. Such thoughts would later become more prevalent in Judaism through the influence of the Stoics, but the Old Testament, just like the New, distinguishes very clearly between God's Spirit and the created reality (cf. Isa. 31:3). Even if the Old Testament teaches that the spirit of man and animal is borrowed from God and returns to Him when they die, there is still no question of an identification of the Spirit of God with the spirit of man or of animals. There is no mention in the Bible of a unity between God and man through which man would in any respect become a divine being. The Scriptures emphasise the singularity of the Spirit of God in relation to the spirit of man (or as Barth would say in the footsteps of Kierkegaard: 'the qualitative distinction'). Eduard Schweizer notes that this is probably the greatest difference between the Old Testament and the East Asian religions, that God in the Old Testament is not understood as the last world that man discovers once he has realised that man is one with the Universe of which God is the life and the power. Also, according to the Old Testament, one cannot discover God if one goes deeply only into one's own spirit (*Heiliger Geist*, 24). The Spirit of God is not a common element that God and man possess together. The Spirit is God himself in his majestic, transcendent, and yet, at the same time, immanent relationship to man.

Already on the basis of this, we can say that the entire idealistic direction of thought, as we have seen it enter into theology since German

Idealism, and as it has still been propounded in our time by Tillich, Pannenberg and the Process theology, has no basis in the Scriptures. This is the result of a form of intellectual thinking that is of Greek rather than of Hebrew origin. The entire twilight field of a romanticised one-on-one thinking of God and man as it appeared in nineteenth-century identity thinking was rightly cleared up by Karl Barth and dialectical theology. Barth did this by denying that there is any direct identity or continuity between God and creation or between God and man. The mediation between God and man takes place through the Spirit of God that is God himself, so that there always remains a qualitative distinction between man and the Spirit of God. Even the unity between God and man in Christ Jesus is not, for Barth, a direct identity, but an indirect identity mediated by the Holy Spirit, just as the Holy Spirit, in an analogous way, ultimately unites all humanity and all creation to Christ and is also connected to God himself. Barth therefore consistently understands the Holy Spirit as the principle of unity between God and man, but nowhere in such a way that the transcendence of the Spirit is affected. One could argue with Barth about the intellectual apparatus he uses in his theological thinking, but with regard to his maintenance of the Deity of the Spirit and his rejection of identity thinking according to the pattern of pantheism or even pan-and-theism, he is completely correct.

(iii) In regard to the question of the personal character of the Holy Spirit, we will have to give a reasoned answer in the light of the Scriptures. In by far the greatest number of places in which the Holy Spirit is referred to in the Scriptures, He is spoken of in terms that apply to a power or an operation rather than to a person. Specifically, as far as the Old Testament is concerned, it is difficult to maintain that it speaks explicitly of the Holy Spirit as a person. It is true that in the Old Testament personal qualities are attributed to the Spirit. It is said of the Holy Spirit that He speaks (2 Sam. 23:2), that He teaches (Neh. 9:20), that He leads the people of God (Ps. 143:10), that He is grieved (Isa. 63:10), and so forth. From this it is clear that the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is sometimes thought of and represented as a person. However, if we simply want to remain on the level of the Old Testament, we must think about the phenomenon of personification. Scheepers points out that the fact that according to the Old Testament, the Spirit of God goes out from Him and remains on the people does not mean that in the time of the Old Testament, the Spirit was thought of as a person next to the person of Yahweh. The word, the arm and the face of God can also be spoken of in such terms of personification. Hebrew thought seems to have had room for considering things such as the face of God, the Name of God, the angel of God, the word and the wisdom of God as personified 'extensions' of God, without the unity of God



thereby being compromised. The Old Testament still barely recognises a principled distinction between an operation that emanates from a person and an independent power that must be considered a 'separate' person. We will have to assume that the Old Testament does not yet speak in an explicitly trinitarian way. With G. A. F. Knight, however, we will be able to say that the personification of the Spirit and possibly also a specific form of hypostasis of the spirit in the Old Testament prepared the way for a fuller revelation regarding the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, because it shows that the Old Testament does not understand the unity of God in a rigid and closed way that excludes the trinitarian revelation of God in the New Testament. As far as the Old Testament itself is concerned, it is likely that we should think of the Spirit as the presence and operation of the personal God. The personal terms thus do not mean that the Spirit is understood as an 'own' person, but as the living and active presence of God himself who is thought of as a person.

The main difference in the way in which the New Testament speaks about the Holy Spirit in comparison with the Old Testament is that the New Testament speaks from a situation in which the fulfilment of the promises of the Old Testament concerning the Spirit has already taken place. This applies not only to the promise that the Messiah will be anointed with the Spirit (Isa. 61; Luke 4), but also to the promise that the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh (Joel 2; Acts 2). The New Testament therefore speaks of the Spirit as the eschatological gift of God that came in the last days to live in the people of God and to implement the new covenant in the relationship between God and the people. The core of the message of the New Testament is that the great salvation-historical turning point came with the coming of the Messiah and with the outpouring of the Spirit. It is now in connection with this great development that the Spirit is spoken of in a way that does connect with what was said about Him in the Old Testament, but which nevertheless goes far beyond that.

In the New Testament as well, there are still a large number of expressions in which the Spirit is referred to in an impersonal way, such as 'received' (Acts 2:38; 8:15, 17, 19; 10:47; 19:2), or that the Spirit comes upon people (Acts 1:8; 19:6), or that the Spirit is 'poured out' (Acts 2:17, 33; 10:45 etc.), which would make one think that the Spirit is understood as the power of God or an action that proceeds from Him. Even Paul, in whose letters we find, just as in the Gospel of John, the culmination of what the New Testament teaches about the Holy Spirit, speaks in impersonal terms about the Spirit (cf. for example, the expression that the Spirit 'must not be quenched' in Thess. 5:19, or the statement that we are all 'filled with the same Spirit' in 1 Cor. 12:13). In a passage such as 1 Cor. 2:4ff., the concepts *pneuma* and *dunamis* even alternate. From this, theologians such



as Bultmann, Schweizer and others deduced that Paul, under the influence of the Hellenistic pneuma proposal, thinks of the Spirit as a specific sphere of influence that gains dominion over man. However, it is inconceivable that Paul would have been to such an extent under Greek influence in his thinking about the Spirit.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that Paul often speaks of the Spirit in personal terms. So Paul knows very well that the Spirit can be grieved (Eph. 4:30), that the Spirit has a specific will (1 Cor. 12:11) and intention (Rom. 8:27), that the Spirit loves (Rom. 15:30), teaches a person (1 Cor. 2:13) and leads (Rom. 8:14), just as He also testifies with the human spirit (Rom. 8:16) and enters into prayer for the believers (Rom. 8:26). A similar expression is also used by John, especially in his expositions about the Paraclete (cf. John 16:7–14; 14:26; 15:26, and others). However, many proponents of the New Testament are of the opinion that we are also dealing with personifications. They point out that Paul can also talk about sin, the law, the flesh and death in personal terms, while thinking of these things as forces that influence and control human life. Even if this were true, it still does not mean that Paul holds the Greek view. We can assume that he would also have thought about the Spirit from the point of view of the Old Testament. In that case, he would not have thought of the Spirit as an impersonal sphere of influence, but as the personal power of God himself.

Obviously, however, much more needs to be said than this. It is indeed true that the Holy Spirit is God himself and that, for that reason, he can be spoken of in personal terms. However, the way in which the Holy Spirit is spoken about in the New Testament indicates something more. Namely, in different places in the New Testament, there is a distinction between God and the Spirit to such an extent that it is impossible to escape the conclusion that, without taking away from the fact that the Spirit is God himself, there is a relationship between the Spirit and God which is in itself of a personal nature. One thinks here for example, of 1 Cor. 2:10ff., where it is attributed to the Spirit that He investigates the depth of God and that He reveals this to man. It is clear that this statement is the sign of a comparison between the role that the human spirit plays in man, and the function that the Holy Spirit plays in the revelation of God. That the Holy Spirit is therefore God himself and belongs to God, just as man's spirit belongs to him and is his own self, will indeed be what Paul means. Yet Paul nonetheless distinguishes between the Holy Spirit and God Himself. The Spirit is the way in which God announces Himself to the outside. In the Spirit, man has to do with God himself, surely, but then also with God in a specific way. We find the same in Rom. 8:26–27, where Paul says that the Spirit intercedes with God for the believers. Such a statement is impossible,

unless Paul assumes that the Spirit and God Himself can be distinct from each other in such a way that the Spirit himself has a relationship with God that can be understood as an interpersonal relationship. This impression is strengthened by the cumulative testimony of texts such as Rom. 8:16 and Gal. 4:6, in which the Spirit is spoken of as the One who lives in the believers, makes them aware of the fact that they are the children of God, bears witness with their spirit and himself calls out in them: Abba, Father! Once again: the Holy Spirit is God Himself, there can be no doubt about that, as is also clear in 1 Cor. 3:16, where, according to Paul, God and the Spirit can simply alternate with each other. But: the Spirit is God as He lives in the believers, as He works in them, testifies, prays and establishes a relationship with the Father. And in that, in Paul's opinion, He is distinct from God the Father himself.

(iv) The full picture of what the New Testament teaches about the personal character of the Holy Spirit can come into view only if we take into account what the New Testament teaches about Christ and his relationship to the Father and the Spirit. That Christ is called the Son in the New Testament, and that nothing less is meant by that than that He really is God Himself who comes to us in the flesh (cf. John 1:1–14) poses the problem in all seriousness of how God should then be thought of, if on the one hand it is confessed that He is *one*, while on the other hand it is also proclaimed about Him that He has revealed Himself at the same time as both the Father and the Son. The confession of the Deity of Christ raises the question of the Trinity, and because of this, the confession regarding the Holy Spirit is also placed in a new context. In a manner of speaking, we can say that the profile of the Holy Spirit becomes properly visible in the New Testament only in the light of the revelation of God in Christ. That is why it is wrong to go into the Pneumatology of the Old Testament or to make the Old Testament statements about the Spirit decisive for teaching about the Spirit, as is often done in recent times in theology, without taking full account of the fact that our knowledge of the Holy Spirit flows from the revelation in Christ. If one thinks about the Spirit mainly from the point of view of the Old Testament, one may easily get stuck in the belief that the Spirit is the giver of life to all things (Pannenberg) or that the Spirit is the Spirit of political liberation (political theology) or that the Spirit is just another name for God in His acting or doing presence (Berkhof). It is extremely difficult to come to conclusions about the personal character of the Spirit on the basis of the Old Testament alone. However, all of this becomes different if we think about the Spirit from the point of view of the New Testament. From the great acts of salvation of God that the New Testament speaks of, we learn to know the Spirit as the eschatological gift that is closely connected to Christ, as the Spirit of the Father and the Son

that confesses together with the Father and the Son and is placed on the same level (cf. the triadic formulas, Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:13; Eph. 4:4–6, and numerous places where the same activity is attributed to the Father and the Son and the Spirit, such as the resurrection, for example: Acts 2:24; Eph. 1:20; Rom. 1:4; 1 Pet. 3:18; Luke 24:34; Acts 17:3, or the revelation: John 7:16; 3:32–34; John 16:13). It is not just the numerical preponderance of the New Testament statements about the Spirit over those of the Old Testament that makes it important to look at the Spirit from the New Testament. This is also the way in which the Spirit is mentioned next to the Father and Christ, which makes it impossible to think that the personal traits assigned to the Spirit in the New Testament can be mere personifications. The Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son in the same way that the Father and the Son are distinct from each other, without any thought that the unity of God may be threatened. In essence, this is really all that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity is trying to say. When in the doctrine of the Trinity the Spirit is spoken of as a ‘person’, what is meant is that the Holy Spirit is a separate person next to the Father and the Son in the modern sense of the word ‘person’, as it has been known since the eighteenth century, namely, a separate individual with his own self-awareness and autonomous self-determination. If this is how the Spirit is thought of (and many naive Christians probably think this way about the Spirit when they hear that He is spoken of as a person), it must necessarily lead to tri-theism. If we speak of the Spirit as a person within the context of the Trinity doctrine, we mean that the Spirit of the Father and the Son must be distinguished separately and seen as a ‘subject-centre’ within the life and action of the one God. The Spirit is not an impersonal force or sphere of influence. The Spirit is God Himself. But the Spirit is not only God in his acting/doing presence, but a specific way in which God is God next to the ways that the Father and the Son are also God. Anything less than that would bring us into conflict with Scripture and land us in the waters of modalism.

(v) This becomes even clearer if we note the relationship between Christ and the Spirit. Especially in the writings of John and Paul, it becomes clear that the spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the eschatological gift that could only be given after the suffering and exaltation of Christ (John 7:39; Gal. 4:4–6). When John in John 7:39 says that the Spirit was not yet there, because Jesus was not yet glorified, he obviously does not mean that the Holy Spirit did not yet exist. This would have been impossible against the background of the Old Testament teaching about the Spirit of God and the message of the synoptic Gospels and of John himself regarding the anointing of Jesus with the Spirit (John 1:32–33). What he means, rather, is that the specific mode of presence and operation experienced by the Holy Spirit in the

congregation since the day of Pentecost was not yet known. This became possible only when Jesus as exalted Lord received the Spirit as a gift from the Father and poured it out on the congregation (Acts 2:33), when the Father sent the 'other Comforter' to the disciples after Jesus' prayer (John 14:16 etc.), when Jesus baptised the congregation with the Holy Spirit and with fire as was repeatedly envisioned (Acts 1:5). The new way in which the Spirit is present in the new dispensation and works in the congregation and the world is therefore closely connected to the salvation–historical turn that took place in Christ. When the Holy Spirit in the New Testament is explicitly and implicitly called the Spirit of Christ (cf. Rom 8:9; 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 4:6; Phil. 1:19 and the statements of John about the Paraclete), then, in the first instance, it is connected with the salvation–historical connection of the new presence and activity of the Spirit to the action, death and glorification of Christ. The Spirit does not cease to be the spirit of God as He was proclaimed in the Old Testament, but He is revealed in the new dispensation as the Spirit of the eschatological salvation given in Christ. It is He who anointed and empowered Christ for his work of salvation, and it is He who is poured out as the Spirit of the Son by the Son to effect salvation in its entirety. That is why Christ and the Spirit are involved and connected to each other in the most profound way. In Christ, the eschaton, the new creation, becomes a reality, but this eschatological reality of the new creation is effected in and by the Spirit.

For this reason, it is understandable that in the New Testament there are expressions that make it seem as if Christ and the Spirit are identified with each other. This applies especially to 1 Cor. 15:45 (in which Christ is called a life–giving Spirit) and 2 Cor. 3:17 (in which it is simply said: 'The Lord is the Spirit'), while one must also think of some of the Paraclete's statements in which the Spirit is presented as the 'alter ego' of Christ (John 14:18, 23, etc.). In Paul, the same things are said alternately of Christ and of the Spirit, such as, for example, that the believers are 'in Christ', or that they are 'in the Spirit', that Christ lives in them or that the Spirit lives in them (cf. Rom. 8:9 – 10; Rom. 6:1 and Gal. 5:22, among other examples). It is on the basis of such texts that different theologians have come to the conclusion that the Spirit of Pentecost is nothing other than the resurrected life of Christ, that Christ and the Spirit are identical, that the Holy Spirit is nothing other than a predicate to Christ to express his active and redemptive presence, and so on. Sometimes it is said that for the believers there is an experiential identity between Christ and the Spirit. However, sometimes it is also called a dynamic, functional or existential identity. Despite all sorts of reservations that are made at times, this vision often results in its being said that the Spirit should not be thought of as a separate person that is distinct from Christ. We are also reminded

of Dunn's position that the Holy Spirit is the Deity of Jesus, and that Jesus is the personality of the (previously impersonal) Holy Spirit. All sorts of problems with the doctrine of the Trinity flow from these views.

However, when we assume that the unity between Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament is connected with the involvement of Christ and the Spirit in the one reality of eschatological salvation, there is no reason at all to talk about an identity of Christ and the Spirit. This was convincingly demonstrated by Ridderbos and Versteeg. In the texts 2 Cor. 3:17 and 1 Cor. 15:45, it is always about the contrast between the old dispensation and the new, between the Adamic man and the eschatological Man, or between the dispensation of the law in Moses and the dispensation of the Spirit in Christ. In both cases it is about a unity between Christ and the Spirit that should be typified rather as a salvation-historical or an eschatological unity if data is thought of as all kinds of other forms of identity. Christ and the Spirit are so directly involved in salvation that whoever has to do with Christ also has to do directly with the Spirit, and vice versa. In contrast to Adam, from whom the dispensation of death proceeded, Christ can rightly in 1 Cor. 15:45 be called a life-giving Spirit, not because Christ and the Spirit are identified, but because the Last Adam shares in the dispensation of the life-creating Spirit. In the reality of the new dispensation, Christ and the Spirit are so closely connected that Paul can say, *so to speak*, that the Lord is the Spirit, only to distinguish between the Lord and the Spirit again (cf. 2 Cor. 3:17).

To conclude from this that the Holy Spirit is not a separate person – in the trinitarian sense of the word, as we have explained – next to Christ, is to miss the statements in which the Spirit is deliberately not separated from Christ, both in his existence and in his task. Apart from the triadic formulas, one may think here of 1 Cor. 12:3, in which it is said that the Spirit teaches one to confess Christ in the right way, or statements to the Paraclete in which the Spirit is pertinently called an 'other' Comforter and in which his task is described as testimony concerning Christ, the glorification of Christ, and so on. The doctrine of the Trinity means nothing other than to do justice to this expression of the New Testament. It wants to express the nuanced way in which the New Testament talks about the unity and the trinity of God. And for that reason, the doctrine of the Trinity is unyielding.

(vi) In our interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity it is essential to move between the ideas of modalism on the one hand and tri-theism on the other. There is talk of modalism all over where the personal character of the Father, the Son and the Spirit is denied or only typified as forms of appearance of God to the outside, without this being grounded in the

essence of God himself. We speak of tri-theism when the three persons in God are independent of each other in such a way that they become three separate individuals. The way between both perceptions is that one must hold firmly to the contention that the three persons of Father, Son and Spirit belong to the eternal essence of God as three distinct personal attitudes, but that their personal character does not mean that they are three independent individuals who exist side by side. When we speak of the Father, the Son and the Spirit as 'persons', we mean that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are three distinct subject-centres within the one being of God who mutually stand in a specific relation to each other and which are distinguished from each other by their personal 'characteristics' (Fatherhood, Sonship, Bond of love between the Father and the Son) and the different ways in which they share in the common works of God outwardly, these being creation, reconciliation and redemption. In each of the Father, the Son and the Spirit we have to do with the personal God himself, so that our relationship to God always remains personal. Our relationship to God can never be other than a relationship with all of the Persons in God at the same time. As all of the works of God outwardly always emanate *from* the Father and take place *through* the Son and *in* the Holy Spirit, so the relationship of man to God is always a relationship in the Spirit through Christ to the Father, or through the Spirit and in Christ to the Father. It is not possible to have a 'private' relationship with the Spirit or with Christ that is not at the same time a relationship with the triune God.

In our opinion, Barth moves within this traditional conception of the Trinity. Barth cannot be so easily accused of modalism. Still, it is a question whether Barth does not show a certain narrowed view of the Trinity in the way in which he understands the Holy Spirit exclusively as the Spirit of Christ. With Barth, the Holy Spirit as subject largely disappears behind Christ as the acting subject, just as the Father fades into the background in his consistent Christocentrism. It is ironic that Barth, who did so much to emphasise the trinity of God and bring it to the fore in theology, is less trinitarian than Christocentric in his own thinking. For Pneumatology, this indeed means that, practically speaking, it becomes merely a function of Christology. The Spirit is understood as the resurrection power of Christ, as the power of Christ's work of salvation. Thus, the person of the Spirit does not get enough of its own accent next to the person of Christ. The 'we' of John 14:23, which cannot be understood otherwise than trinitarian, is thus narrowed, because for Barth the Spirit is the second form of the Parousia of Christ. The Spirit may not only be understood as a mode of the presence of Christ, but as the 'other' Comforter. The 'two-ness' of Christ

and the Spirit must remain upheld, however strong the emphasis is on their unity as two views of the one God.

One can understand the reaction that arose against Barth's inclusion of Pneumatology in Christology. We see this with those who advocate a community conception of the Trinity, but also with Van Ruler and Noordmans and with all those who want to place more emphasis on the own identity of the Spirit in distinction from Christ. In all kinds of new studies on Pneumatology, questions are asked about the specific peculiarity of the Spirit in distinction from Christ. Obviously, different points of view are put forward. In more than one, however, the thought that was already present in the writings of Augustine, that the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son, is again reverted to. The conclusion is then drawn from this that the work of the Spirit outwardly is in accordance with its function in the inner trinitarian connection. This means that the Spirit is active in the world as the Spirit of love or the Spirit of community. Although this thought also plays a role in Barth, it is not developed as completely in his work as it is in Heribert Mühlen, Moltmann or Jüngel. In various studies of his, Jan Veenhof also comes back to the fact that the Spirit is the great 'Bridge Builder', because He not only connects God and man in love and reconciliation, and not only connects man and man to each other across all borders, but also connects the church of today with the contemporaries of Jesus.

The purpose of this search for the Spirit's own identity is evidently not to make the Spirit independent of Christ. At the heart of the matter, Barth's message that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ is not doubted or disputed. However, this is the way in which the 'relative independence' of the Spirit is compromised for him, which forces him to search in all kinds of ways for a greater understanding of the 'dispersion in the Trinity' and a greater 'play-space for the Spirit'. We can completely agree with that, provided that the boundaries that exist here are not crossed again and the Spirit is detached from Christ in such a way that the danger of tri-theism or spiritualism is threatened. In certain forms in which the community conception of the Trinity is presented, we realise that this is indeed the case. The idea of 'God as a committee' (Come) is unacceptable to us, because it tends towards tri-theism. But even with Van Ruler and Noordmans, one must remain aware of the possibility that – undoubtedly contrary to their own intention – the Spirit can be granted a freedom towards Christ which can pave the way to spiritualism.

What is valuable about Van Ruler and Noordmans is that they want to draw attention to the breadth of the work of the Spirit and also to its dynamic character. We pass by here regarding Van Ruler's peculiar



reference to the Son and the Spirit as an 'intermezzo' and the possibility that a form of Patromonism may be present in it, which threatens the full quality of the doctrine of the Trinity. For us, it is more about the attempt of both Van Ruler and Noordmans to say something more about the Spirit than is possible with Barth. We believe that deep down they are not opposed to Barth, but instead complement Barth in a way that should not be overlooked. Barth rightly emphasised that the Spirit is the Spirit of revelation, and for him revelation and salvation simply coincide. But it is not sufficient for Barth that the Spirit spans the ages with His work of revelation and salvation, and that in addition, with His many forms, he drives salvation in Christ into existence in a dynamic way in history (as Van Ruler states) and so the salvation in Christ in history is not 'inflected and conjugated' (as Noordmans says). With Van Ruler there is an extremely valuable vision of the Kingdom present which is missing with Barth. With Noordmans there is a stronger accent on the dynamic of the Spirit in history than there is with Barth. With Barth, history too easily disappears from the field of vision. Within the framework of what he calls the 'Geschichtlichkeit' of God, everything is always current, but there is not much room for development, growth and for the 'play-space of the Spirit'. Here again, we encounter a central weakness in Barth's theology which not only results in man and Christ being too closely related to each other to make any room for history, but also means that the Spirit and Christ are too closely involved with each other to make history come true.

Once again: the search for the Spirit's own identity is meaningful, provided that the boundaries are not crossed. The boundaries are crossed when Christ and the Spirit are separated from each other, and this often manifests itself in such a way that the Word and the Spirit are separated from each other, that the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith are separated from each other, that the facts of salvation in history and the life of the congregation are separated from each other under the power of the Spirit. In modern times, we see, both in the Pentecostal movement and in specific forms of revolutionary theology, examples of an independence of the Holy Spirit towards Christ and the Word. One can argue about the question of whether the traditional reformed belief that the Spirit is not always and under all circumstances bound to the Word, did not, among other things, contribute to the fact that such movements fall onto favourable soil today. However, through this, the primal intention of the reformed Reformation was given up rather than realised. It is important that, whatever we may say about the freedom of the Spirit of God, we must hold fast to the testimony of the Scriptures that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ and therefore the Spirit of the Word of God.



## 5. The relationship from Christ to God

The first Christians confessed in a spontaneous manner that they believed in one God, the Father, that revealed Himself through his Son, Jesus Christ, and gathered a congregation for Him through his Holy Spirit in whom He lives. This faith is confessed in terms of what was borrowed from the writings from the apostles and their learners during the first generations after the death of the apostles, without thinking about all the questions that could be brought to the fore. Neither in the writings of the New Testament itself or in the writings of the 'Apostolic Fathers' from the time after the death of the apostles do we note that the confession with regard to Christ and the Holy Spirit caused any problems for the Christians in the sense that the unity of God was compromised. Admittedly, the Christians experience this as a big secret that the One True God revealed himself through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and came to live among people, but the intellectual question with regard to how the One True God can have a Son and can manifest Himself through the Holy Spirit as a distinguishable divine being is not yet revealed. It is only when a confrontation between the Christians on the one hand and the Jews and Greeks on the other occur that the mature consideration of the representation of God become an acute matter for the Christians. For the Jews the Christian faith was a betrayal against the monotheistic faith in God of the prophets. They interpret the Christian honouring of Jesus Christ as the Lord and the call of his Name during prayer as ditheism. According to the Jewish opinion, the unity of God can be understood only as a numerical unity and a solitude of God in Himself so that it is impossible for Himself to step away from Himself. Even the wise speculations from someone like Philo, who spoke about the Logos or wisdom of God as a sort of intermediate being between God and the created world (especially on the basis of Proverbs 8:22–31), would not have been able to judge the Christian faith otherwise. The Logos of Philo is God's first creation and has nothing to do with the revelation of God or the Biblical thought that the Word of God is God and also the intercessor between God and people (see Jhn 1:1 gospel; 1 Jhn. 1). In his work 'Dialogue with Trypho', from the second half of the second century, Justin the Martyr gives an insight into the fierce struggle that existed between the Jews and the Christians with regard to the confession of Christ as God and Lord. The Christians also had to endure strong critique from the wise thoughts of the Greeks. From the Greek opinions about the transcendence and immutability of God it is silly to think that God could become human. From the writings of Origen such as 'Contra Celsum' it also turns out that the Greek combatants of the Christian confession of faith experienced it as an anomaly that the historic figure of Jesus of Nazareth could be honoured as God and also maintain that they are not guilty of dishonouring God. All

of the intellectual problems that would be brought in against the Christian confession of the godly son ship of Christ throughout the ages were brought to the fore with clarity during the first few generations.

The Christians defended themselves against these arguments by holding on to the fact that the confession of Christ does not bring the unity of God nor His immutability and transcendence in jeopardy. In their attempt to defend and explain this point of view in the wise language and concepts of their time, we have to see the birth of the first fully-fledged 'theological thoughts' in the sense in which this thought is still used today. For the sake of the clarity we take these attempts in connection with the question as to how to rhyme the unity and transcendence of God with the confession of Christ as the Son of God. The first attempt tries to leave the unity and transcendence of God untouched by understanding the confession of Christ and that He cannot be placed together with God on one level. In the relationship between God and the creation, Christ is placed on the side of creation against God so that there can be no mention of deitism because Christ is not really God. The second attempt tries to let unity and transcendence prevail by associating Christ with God so that He is placed on God's side in the relationship between God and creation. There is no question about deitism but the danger is that Christ will not really be understood as a person. In light of what we said previously, the first attempt can be showed as ebionism of impact while the second one is docetic. While the church did not go for either one of these ways, they found a satisfactory way to answer the problem of the relationship of Christ to God through the confession of God as the Triune.

### 5.1 Christ is distinguishable from God and subordinate to Him

In their attempts to think the Christ confession through theologically it was obvious that the Christian Apologetics – who could be seen as the first Christian theologians – would serve them with Greek philosophical terms. It was said often that they robbed the Christian confession of its meaning and brought it completely under the attachment of Greek thought (for example, the famous dogma historian, Harneck). This is, however, definitely an exaggeration. Nobody will want to deny that the Greek thoughts and terminology had a big impact on the theological thoughts of the first centuries. It is, however, clear that the theology was able to keep the Biblical confession regarding Christ pure against the sucking power of the Greek philosophical thoughts and that the formulated dogmata from the church restricted the confession in a remarkable way against the Greek philosophical thoughts. Unfortunately, there was no clarity from the beginning with regard to the issues in question and thus Greek ideas were used in an unauthorised way, which caused damage to the truth that

the confession wanted to bring in trying to reach an accountability of the Christian confession. This is the case when making use of the *Logos*-concept in the Christology of the Apologetics. This concept forced itself implicitly onto the first theologians, since it is not only used in the Gospel of John and in the first Letter of John as a sign of Christ, but also played a role in the stoicism and Platonic philosophy during that time. It was also used by Philo to explain the universal meaning of Judaism and his monotheistic concept of God. The Apologetics did not have a liking in the difference between John and the Greek philosophy or Philo. When John refers to Christ as the *Logos*, it is clear that He indicates Himself as God in his personal revelation, as the Only-begotten that is in the bosom of the Father and declares Him because He was in the beginning with God and is self-God (see Jhn. 1:1–14). For John, the Word became flesh meant that God personally took on our human flesh and that He could do it since He possessed the distinction between the *Logos* and the Father ‘from the beginning’ and ‘in Himself’. For John, the *Logos* is a person, the Creation intercessor, the Revelation and the One through whom grace and truth become a part of the lost humanity.

The *Logos*-concept is used in a totally different manner in Greek philosophy and by Philo. In the Greek thoughts with names in the Platonism, the *Logos* is understood as the reasonable concept that is present in the entire cosmos and is equated with the immanence of the transcended God. As divine reason the *Logos* is the principle that binds God as the undivided One (*to hèn*) with the multiplicity of the material reality. God is thought to be a pure spirit. In the entire reality of the world there are degrees of proximity to God. Matter is the furthest away from God and is typified as non-signal. The more spiritual the reality becomes, the more it is part of the signal of God and the closer it stands to Him. The *Logos* is now the divine, spiritual or reasonable principle in the world that binds it to God. The *Logos* is, however, not God Himself. It is an emanation out of God but it stands on the same line as the reality of the world and not with God.

We have already stated that the *Logos*-concept of Philo had the same meaning as that of the Gospel of John. The mistake that the Apologetics made was to serve themselves too easily with the *Logos*-concept without distinguishing enough between the content that was given to it in the Bible and also outside the Bible. They joined Philo to be clear that the *Logos* was nothing more than the Wisdom that was already spoken about in the Old Testament, which found expression in the law of Moses and that was also the source of everything that is true in the pagan philosophy (Justin the Martyr and Tatian among others). The same *Logos* would become flesh in Christ. On the basis of this they could draw the conclusion that the

Christianity is the 'true philosophy', because the message comes from the reincarnated Logos.

They tried achieving an apologetic benefit in this way, but the price was very high. By talking about the Logos in this way, they had to fill up the Logos-concept with content that Platonism and Philo – who also thought like Plato at this stage – attached to it. They are also going to start thinking about the Logos as the 'logical power' that is present in God (*Logos endiathetos*) which is sent out by Him to represent his immanence in the reality of the world (*Logos proforikos*). This, however, means that they will be thinking about the Logos in *impersonal terms*. Even if Justin talks about the Logos or Wisdom as the pre-existing Son, Servant or Descendent of God, it is clear that he meant that the Logos is a personified aspect of God, the source of all wisdom, order and morality in the cosmos. Tatian also spoke about the Logos as the logical power that existed before creation in God and that it was sent as a deed from God to build a bridge between God and creation. These opinions stay almost exclusively within the sphere of Platonism. The Logos is the principle of God's wisdom that can appear in the prophets and other persons. It appeared in an exceptionally concentrated manner in Jesus of Nazareth and revealed his entire fullness.

Together with this comes the further consequence that the Logos should be understood and thought about as *subject to God*. Even though he calls the Logos a 'second God' (*deuteros Theos*) in connection with an expression of Philo, it is subject to God and serves Him in everything. The more people thought in Platonic terms, the more the Logos was thought to be on the side of the creation as '*Logos proforikos*', since it was an emanation from God just like the entire creation. These thoughts led to the answering of the doubts of the Jews and Greeks against the Christian confession by showing that the unity and transcendence of God was not endangered by the confession of Christ, simply because *He is not on the same level as the Father but rather is subject to God*.

Even someone like Origen (where lots of other sound could be heard) said that although the Logos is the Son of God who was born from a deed of eternal generation by the Father, is not equal to the Father. According to Origen, the Son is one being with the Father (*homo-ousios*), but that They are still unequal in power and scope. The Son is subject to the Father, because He is not undone (*aggenetos*) like the Father. He was caused by the Father (*aitiatos*) and thus can even be called a creature (*ktisma*). The Father is the true God (*ho Theos*), but the Son is only *Theos* (without the article). When looking from the human side, the Son is infinitely exalted, but when looking from the side of God, He is the first link in the line of emanations. Origen was certain that Christ should not be worshipped like

the Father – an opinion that is logical if you realise that Origen saw the *Logos* as a type of being in between God and human and Christ as a person who was fulfilled by the *Logos* in an exceptional manner; do not stand unambiguously on the side of God.

In the meantime, it is necessary to note that it is not just via the handling of the *Logos*-concept that the Greek Concept of God had an impact on the early Christian theologians. This was also the case at the school of thought that was known as *monarchianism*, since it emphasised the transcendence and sovereignty of God – and thus also a form of monotheism – who lent its power to the Greek representation of God. Monarchianism distinguishes between *dynamic* and *modalistic* monarchianism. We will come back to the modalistic monarchianism. We first place the focus on dynamic monarchianism since it also involved the subordination of Christ to God from the outspoken intention to ensure that the unity and transcendence of God would not be brought into jeopardy through the confession of Christ.

This direction in Christology is usually called *subordinationism*. The things it worked with have travelled a long way in the early Christian thoughts. We already indicated that Christ was seen as a normal person in the Christology of the ebionites who had special gifts and who were adopted by the Father as his Son at a certain stage in his life – for example, at his baptism. Similar adoption thoughts occurred widespread during the second century in the church (for example, in the ‘Shepherd of Hermas’). Dynamic monarchianism agrees with this and emphasises that Christ was a person despite the unique and unsurpassed meaning that He had. The special meaning that Christ has comes from the fact that the Holy Spirit equipped Him with extraordinary powers (*dynameis*) at his baptism so that He could perform miracles, take a Holy walk and be an example of virtue for all people (Theodotus the Tanner, Theodotus the Money Exchanger and Berillus of Bosra). On this point of view, it becomes possible to maintain the exceptional meaning of Christ on the one hand while He is still delimited from God on the other hand.

This subordinationism became fully developed in the thoughts of Paul of Samosata, Lucien of Antioch, and finally the famous Arius. Paul of Samosata was actually the first consistent unitarian. According to him, God is only one person while the *Logos* and *Sophia* that can be distinguished in God are His characteristics. The *Logos* that is visible in Christ is nothing more than the impersonal power of reason of God that lived in Christ like a temple. This gave exceptional qualities to Christ but regarding his nature, He was from beneath. Lucien speaks in the same way about Christ. To add to what Origen said, he called the *Logos* ‘a creature’ because God is the

only Unborn along whom there is nothing that is not created. Arius also states that the Logos which took on Christ's form was created by God's will and advice out of nothing. He distinguishes between the *Logos* which is present as the power of reason in God and the *Son-Logos* which is a creature and that became alive in Christ. With regard to the Son-Logos one can say that He had started out as a creature and that there was a time when He did not exist. He is in all aspects unequal to the Father. Truly He is a perfect creature that was created by God before creation to serve as an intercessor at the start of creation, but as a creature He was subject to all kinds of limitations. Arius proceeds from the view that the Son-Logos took the place that the spirit of each person takes. Therefore he argues that since the Bible talks about the predisposition of development of Christ as well as the weakness, suffering and even the death of Christ, it is clear that the Son-Logos was not perfect and thus could not be God.

Arius is so filled with the Greek philosophy on the transcendence of God that it is impossible for him to believe that God Himself could take on the flesh of Christ. This would place God in the dust in an illegal manner. That is why he tries to understand the Son-Logos as an intermediate being between God and the dust. When he sometimes talks about Christ as 'the only-begotten God' or even as 'strong God', they remain transferable terms for him, and he suggests that even judges could be called 'gods' in the Bible sometimes. Arius argued that Christ earned these titles for Himself because, while having a reasonable free will like any other being and while being susceptible to error, he still persisted in doing good. This astounding fact presents itself that Arius who fought against the Logos-Christology out of fear for the Polytheism and who wanted to hold on to the absolute unity of God, made a semi-god out of Christ that stood between God and the people.

## 5.2 Christ is a form of appearance of God

Like we said, the second attempt to bring the confession of Christ into agreement with the unity and transcendence of God, led to the complete identification of Christ with God and the Father, in order to fully exclude the danger of ditheism.

We see this with names in the *modalism*, a school of thought that is usually placed under one heading of the monarchianism together with subordinationism. Just as the subordinationism (or dynamic monarchianism) wanted to defend against the danger of deitism and wanted to uphold the sovereignty of God, modality also wanted to. In contrast to the dynamic monarchianism, the modalistic monarchianism emphasises that Christ is not subjective to the Father but rather *is* God, so

that one cannot speak about two Gods but only about one God who reveals Himself in different ways (*modi*).

Noëtus learned that Christ is the Father and that the Father became flesh, died and arose. He would have said that it is one and the same God that is visible and invisible, limited and unlimited, powerless and powerful, born and unborn, mortal and immortal. Tertullian gave Noëtus the mock name of *patripassian*: 'the one who caused the Father to suffer'. In history, modalism was often called *patripassianism*. According to Tertullian, Praxeas would say that the Father made Himself like the Son by adopting a body, or also that the Son emerged from Himself because nothing is impossible for God. Also, Callixtus, bishop of Rome, declared that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one and the same (*hèn kai tò auto*) and that the Spirit who became flesh in the Son, is the same as the Father.

The most famous representative of modalism was Sabbelius. Modalism is often called 'Sabellianism'. His point of departure is the one personality of God. The same God is Father, Son and Spirit at the same time so that it is only a difference in name when referring to God in these three ways. Father, Son and Spirit are the three *modi* or forms of revealing of the one person of God or also three energies in God that appears in successive steps of revealing that God could reveal Himself first as the Father, then as the Son and finally as the Holy Spirit. God isn't Father, Son and Holy Spirit at the same time but reveals Himself consecutively under these three *prosopa* (masks). Sabbelius thus learns a trinity of revealing and not a trinity of creatures. Therefore he makes use of suggestions from the Stoicism school of thought where it was customary to bring reconciliation between the multiplicity of gods and the idea of one God by distinguishing between the one divine being (*ousia*) and a multiplicity of forms of revealing (*prosopa*).

This presentation of the relationship between Christ and the Father should necessarily lead to docetism. In the case where Jesus relates to God in a massive way and He is called only one of God's 'masks', his historical, human existence becomes unimportant. He is being described only in terms of his Godliness. This means that the suffering and death of Christ should only be understood as something that happens with a certain revelatory form of God, behind which the unknown and hidden *ousia* of God still remain untouched. Modalism could therefore not be seen as a successful attempt in answering the critique against the confession of Christ, since it tried to uphold the unity of God in such a manner that the humanity of Christ became meaningless, while also experiencing big problems in upholding the transcendence of God should the statement that God became human, suffered and died be taken seriously.



It is, however, not only the modalism that leads to doctrinal views. Even a theologian such as Origen, who fought against Sabellius, could not always escape doctrinal representations. He could not ascribe to the fact that the Logos, which is immutable as God, could have a direct connection with a mortal body. That is why he advocated the theory that the human soul of Jesus was necessary as a link between the Logos and the body of Christ. This soul would have been pre-existent and also spotless and pure while staying in the closest connection with the Logos throughout many centuries. Origen states that every nature kept its own characteristics at the uniting of the human and divine natures in Christ. The unchanged soul of the Logos could not suffer and therefore the human soul of Jesus suffered and died. As a result of the intimate uniting of Jesus' soul with the Logos, it possesses capacities that elevate it high above the normal human soul. According to Origen, the body of Christ would have a wonderful nature because it was changed into something spiritual and divine and had the ability to take on the form of any characteristic or shape that the Logos deemed necessary to make Himself visible. The humanity of Christ was made divine by uniting it with the divine nature. After the resurrection the deification process is set forth, by practically elevating the humanity of Christ into the Deity of the Logos.

Although there is a big difference in how the Docetism appeared in the gnostic groups and the Docetism trends of modalism or from theologians such as Origen, they all share a common point and that is that they could not let justice be done to the humanity of Christ. Any seepage away from the true humanity of Christ affected the heart of the gospel for the realisation of the Old Church. Thoughts in this direction were in abundance. The bare fact that we can quote Origen as an example in both the subordinationism and the Docetism show how unclear the Christology thoughts was in the first centuries.

### 5.3 The Trinitarian confession

Clarity with regard to the relationship of Christ to God could be acquired only when the church pushed through until the Trinitarian confession of God. Through the Trinitarian confession it becomes possible to hold onto the distinction of Christ from God the Father, and also to his unity with God the Father. At the same time it also becomes possible to confess the incarnation without the unity of transcendence of God being affected by it. The Trinitarian confession of God is a pure Christian confession that is the fruit of the revelation of God in the history. This holds nothing less than a total break from both the Judaistic and Greek representations of God. The answer of the church on the criticism on the side of the Jews and Greeks exists in that the church made it clear on the basis of the gospel that people



need to think in another way about God, his unity and transcendence other than how it happened in Judaism and in Greek philosophy and that the incarnation should be understood on its own within the framework of a Trinitarian Concept of God.

According to the Biblical thought, God is not a being that is locked up in his loneliness, but He is the living God that can step outside with his revelation and that can relate Himself with his creation because He possesses wealth within Himself of a multiplicity in his existence as Father, Son and Holy Spirit that is one but should also be distinguished from each other. That is why it is not difficult to understand from the Trinitarian confession of God that God could become flesh in the incarnation without problems occurring in connection with the unity of God. Likewise it is not difficult to relate the incarnation and the transcendence with each other from the Christian faith in God. God does not stand against his creation, like in the Greek opinions, so that He cannot relate with it. In the incarnation God only 'came to his property' (John 1:11). There is no unbridgeable gap between God and the created that makes the incarnation impossible in advance, and the transcendence of God is also not lifted up by his presence in the flesh.

It remains the incomparable earning of the council of Nicea (325) that the foundation of the Christian Trinitarian confession lied and cut off the Christological fallacies to the right and left that were linked together with the acceptance of a Greek-philosophic concept of God. The council confessed unequivocally that the Logos who became human, is one being (*homo-ousios*) with the Father and thus is God Himself. The deliverance of the council sounds as follows: 'We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born from the Father, the only-begotten Son, this is from the being of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one of being with the Father, through Whom everything was made, both that in heaven and on earth; who came down for our people and our salvation and became human; who suffered and resurrected on the third day and ascended into heaven...'

Together with the statements of this council every form of subordinationism and ebionitism were condemned in clear terms. Not only Arius but also plenty of statements that occurred with Origen are rejected. Modalism is also implicitly rejected at the same time, since the twoness of Father and Son is emphasised explicitly. The council also condemned the thought that the Logos would be subject to any change at the end of his statements. The Docetism is furthermore clearly excluded. The council moves directly from the statement that the Son is one being with the Father to immediately stating that He suffered. Even though it

was not the actual point of view of the council, the Trinitarian confession holds an answer to the problem to which the Docetism tried to provide an answer to. Only through the distinction in God's being does it become possible to talk about the suffering and death of the Son of God, without falling into patripassianism.

A hefty fight regarding the decision of this particular council followed in the decades after the council of Nicea. Many rejected it because they secretly held the conceptions of the subordinates while others believe that the council did not distance itself enough from the modalism. Athanasius, who was the actual father of the orthodox confession of the trinity of God, defended the decisions of Nicea and especially the term *homo-ousios*. Athanasius could not make use of the terminology of the ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity. The terms *ousia* and *hupostasis* were used as synonyms at the council of Nicea and also as an indication of the concept of being. Clarity with regard to how the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in their unity and distinction of each other should be formulated broke through only slowly. The so-called three Cappadocians, Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Gregory of Nazianse, made a huge contribution.

Following in the footsteps of thoughts that were spoken earlier by Tertullian, they decided to use the term *ousia* only for the one divine Being that existed as Father, Son and Spirit, while the term *hupostasis* was used as an indication of the persons in the divine Trinity. It could be stated clearly that God is one Being that reveals Himself in three Persons (*mia ousia treis hupostaseis*). The second ecumenical council of Constantinople (381) also expanded on some of the points made by Nicea, for example, through adding the confession regarding the Godliness of the Holy Spirit.

With the formulation of the Trinitarian confession the first big problem of Christology – the relationship of Christ to God – was decided for the church.

## The Living God<sup>1</sup>

Johan Heyns

### 1. Introduction

1. How can *a person* talk about God – a creature about his Creator, a sinful man about the Holy God? Should we not rather follow the inspired counsel of the prophet Habakkuk: *let all the earth keep silent before Him!* (Habakkuk 2:20)? Will there not be greater justice for Him in a silence about God? Does God himself not keep our mouths closed with his loftiness and glory, with his majesty and exaltation? But if we were to be silent, because we think that this would suit God better, what do we then do with the equally inspired words of the poet: Rejoice before the Lord, all the earth! (Ps. 100:1)? Do we dismiss this as an inexplicable contradiction in the Scripture? Fortunately, we do not have to do this. After all, the Scripture itself is proof that God has not been silent about Himself, and that we therefore may talk about Him and also should talk about Him. But then what is said must be something that suits God – a silent discourse as it were, in which the deep reverence for the living God will radically wipe out and make impossible in advance all signs of human pride in every word about Him and in every formulation concerning Him.

2. Assured of his calling, and with the help of many people – even non-Israelites – Solomon built a temple for the God of his people, ‘a fixed place for You – he says in his prayer – to live in forever’ (1 Kings 8:13). But at the same time, he nevertheless asks in the same consecration prayer: ‘Would God really live on earth? Look, the heavens, yes, the highest heaven cannot contain You, so how much less this house that I have built?’ (v 27). The tension in Solomon’s thought: a temple for God to live in forever, but a temple that cannot contain Him, is a dialectic also inherent in the building of a temple of concepts. Even if the building material originates from the revelation of the Scriptures, it is still a temple that cannot accommodate God in his majesty and his exaltation. And yet we are called to build such a temple of concepts in the formulation of our thoughts about God Himself, one that will not only be worthy of Him, but one that will at the very

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1 Translated from Heyns, J.A. 1978. Dogmatiek. Pretoria: N.G. Kerkboekhandel Transvaal. 37-77.

least radiate his presence so clearly, that will bring Him praise, so that fellowship with Him will be something to be desired.

## 2. The existence of God

1. The fact that we have dealt first with the revelation, and then with God, does not mean that we are only now dealing with God. It has always been about God, because He is after all the Subject of the revelation. Without God there would be no revelation, but then the contrary is also true: without the revelation, we cannot know God. We must now pay attention to the existence of God, which is taken for granted in the revelation.

2. God exists; in other words, God *is*. But there *are* many things in the world: there *are* people, there *are* animals, there *are* houses, there *are* clouds. The typical thing about these things that *are*, is that they can be proved empirically by sensory perception. This is not the case with God, however, and therefore we must say: God *is* not – at least not in the way that other things *are*. The *is/are* of things and the *is* of God is not the characteristic that God and things have in common. God is not merely one among others or similar to other things that *are*. Naturally, He *is*, but in His own way – in his all contributory, all inclusive, all determining and all leading way. Therefore, the *is* of God is a Godly *is*. It is not a puzzle or a problem that can be solved or explained once and for all; it is an enigma and a mystery that can only be accepted and worshipped because, and only in as far as, it has been revealed to man. This is not to say that God's *being* and his revelation coincide. God's existence is not about his revelation. He also exists outside of his revelation, because He is unendingly more than and greater than what has been revealed to us. He is the Source and the Lord of his revelation, in other words, he is not dependent upon the revelation for his existence, just as He is not a prisoner of it. We know about God's existence, not from abstracting thoughts, but solely from His revelation to us, and it is with this revealed God that we have fellowship.

3. Nevertheless, in history, several attempts have been made not merely to accept the existence of God as a given, but also to prove it. The best known of the so-called proofs of God's existence – two of which are connected with the *world*, two with *man*, and one in *history* – are briefly the following:

*The cosmological proof emanates from the law of the world and finds that this law is causally determined. For every effect there is a cause, while this cause itself is also caused. This chain of cause and effect leads to a cause that could not have been caused, in other words, a cause which*

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*must be the cause of everything. This Cause is God. From the changeable, the Unchangeable is brought about, and from the relative, the Absolute.*

*The teleological proof does not emanate from the causality but from the purposefulness in the world. There is a purpose for and with everything in the world. This purpose, beauty and harmony could not have originated of itself, and therefore there must be a Goal-setter who leads everything towards a future destination. This can only be God.*

*The ontological proof begins with man and establishes that the idea of God is a phenomenon found in all humans. Only God can be responsible for this. Thus, it can be concluded that the existence of God originates from the thoughts or ideas about God.*

*The moral proof finds in man an ethical idea, because man, on the basis of his conscience, has an intuitive feeling about law and order, of good and evil, of responsibility and dedication. Mankind can only have received this moral characteristic from God.*

*The ethnological proof studies the history of peoples and cultures and finds that all people venerate some or other god or gods, and that they therefore practise religion. This phenomenon cannot be meaningfully explained unless the existence of God is accepted.*

4. Earlier in history, a greater value was often afforded to the proofs of God's existence. Strictly speaking, however, we are not dealing here with *proof* of the existence of God. And this is for the simple reason that the existence of God *cannot* be proved. The danger of this does not lie only in a total overstraining of human reason, but also in the fact that the revelation itself becomes completely unnecessary. Yet this can surely not be viewed as completely valueless. It at least offers a proof of the reasonableness of the belief in the existence of God and a proof of the unreasonableness of the belief that God does not exist. Is the truth of what the poet said not also illustrated here: 'It is foolish to think that there is no God' (Ps.14:1, 53:2, 10:4)? God and faith belong together, because there is revelation between God and man. But God and reason also belong together, and if the existence of God cannot be proved by reason, it is accepted in faith. There are many 'proofs of the existence of God' to be found in faith: both in sacred history as well as in ordinary history.

5. The God that exists and in whom we believe is an *only* and *singular*, *spiritual* Being, according to art. 1 of the Belgic Confession (NGB). That God is *one* (Deut. 6:4) expresses his absolute uniqueness, and this is clear in both the Old and the New Testament. Different from the case of the

Canaanites or the Babylonians, the God of Israel has no part in families of gods. He stands in no family relationship with other gods and what he deserves may not be attributed to anyone or anything else. This does not mean that He is lonely and alone; He is after all the God of fellowship: inter-trinitarian within Himself and to the outside with man and with the entire cosmos. He is, however, alone in His Godliness. There are no other gods near Him, and He does not tolerate other gods alongside Him. While other gods in the old East were surrounded at the very least by spouses, such a thing could never happen in the sanctuaries of Israel. Worship, glorification, thanksgiving, supplication – all of these that are deserved exclusively by God – may also not be given to anyone else (Exod. 20:3; Josh. 24:17, 1 Kings 18:39; Ps. 86:8). Isaiah must convey the word of God to the people: ‘I am the First and I am the Last; Besides Me there is no God’ (44:6, cf. Isa. 45:5, Jer. 2:11, 16:20). Therefore there may be no other gods served besides this one and only God – creature of the human heart. These creations, artfully put together and decorated with silver and gold, are like scarecrows in a cucumber garden (Jer. 10:5); they have a mouth, but they don’t speak, they have eyes, but do not see; ears but do not hear; they have a nose, but do not smell; hands but do not touch; feet but they do not walk (Ps. 115:5ff). And above them all, yes, above the circle of the earth, God is enthroned and stretched across the heavens like a fine cloth and is spread like a tent in which to dwell (Isa. 40:22). That God is an only being is thus far more than merely monotheism. The deepest essence of God has, however, not yet been measured in saying that God is *one*. There are, after all, heathen religions that also have a monotheistic understanding of gods. But that this one God is God – the living, creating and recreating God and that this one God who is God is our God, and our God is forever (Ps. 48:15) – it is the only nature of the God of the Bible. Paul told it to the Corinthians like this: ‘We know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no other God but one. For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth ... yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist’ (1 Cor. 8:4ff). Only of God can it be said in the true sense that He lives. That is why He is also the Source of all life.

*We will also be able to express the difference between the idols and God – in the light of our earlier remarks – as follows: God is not, but the idols are – they are as the things are, and therefore essentially also no different from the things. God does not have a history of becoming other than that of his revelation, but the idols do, and in particular the history of the idols is the opposite of the text in Gen. 1:27: man creates his gods in his image and in his likeness.*

6. God is a *simple* being. The reason for adding this qualification to the definition of the essence of God in art. 2 must initially be sought in the intensified struggle of the church against all kinds of heresies. In the first centuries already, the Gnostics had taught that in God there is a perpetual process of outflow and return of aeons (intermediate beings) who together constitute the spiritually invisible fullness of God. For them, God was therefore a composite being that was composed of separate parts. In later centuries a battle between the Socinians and the Remonstrants broke out. The Socinians did attribute Holy characteristics to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, but they claimed that they did not belong to the essence of God, while the Remonstrants declared that not everything that is in God belongs to God Himself or to his being.

*The church on the other hand confesses – in the footsteps of the Scriptures – that God is a simple being. There is nothing in Him that is not truly God Himself. There is no composition of parts in Him, no process of changing from a lesser to a more perfect condition, no passive ability that would indicate latent and not yet completely developed possibilities. God is what He has, and what He has is Godly. One characteristic is also not closer to, or a better description, or a purer expression of the Godly Being than another. Even if a distinction were to be made between the different characteristics or virtues of God, not one of them could be separated or isolated from his being. When speaking of his power, or fairness, or wisdom, or love, one is speaking of God Himself. In Neo-Platonic philosophy, by Plotinus among others, the being of God is an empty, abstract concept without content. But in the Scriptures God is the eternal fullness of virtue and perfection, in which everything is essential to the godliness of God. Therefore, there can also not be any opposition between his perfections, between his love and his holiness, between his justice and his mercy. He is not partly love and partly holiness, or partly just and partly merciful. He is completely everything, and everything completely.*

7. God is a *spiritual* being. Calvin says that it is this spiritual nature of God – to which all of the Scriptures bear witness – that forbids us to think of God in an earthly or fleshly way. Through all of the centuries the church has always seen the spirituality of God's being, an indication of his non-corporeality and non-material nature. There is, of course, no mention of hostility of God towards the material, because He Himself is the Creator of the material world. Rather, there is an exaltation above as well as a radical otherness from our bodily-material and time-spatial dimensional limitations when the essence of God is indicated as spiritual (John 4:24; cf. 2 Cor. 3:17; Deut. 4:12, 15). At the same time, God's spirituality can also not



be equated with that of the angels. In contrast to anything created, God is radically different in every way.

8, And yet the existence of God is also so different – and so spiritual – that He Himself cannot make himself known to us in typical human characteristics and functions. We do not hear only of the acts of God (among others that He hears, speaks, walks – Gen. 16:11; Mark 1:11; Gen. 3:8), but also of his faculties (among others, ears, eyes, hands – 2 Kings 19:16; Job 10:8) and his emotions (among others, love, anger, remorse – Deut. 7:8; Rom. 1:18; Gen. 6:6). The big question now, is how must this human-type talk about God (anthropomorphisms) be explained, especially in the light of his spiritual nature? Different possibilities have been attempted: *Christologically* – as a proclamation about God in terms of the person and work of Jesus Christ; *ontically* – as an indication of a form of corporeality that must be assigned to God's being itself; *anthropologically* – as a consequence of man created in the image of God; and *eschatologically* – as a foreshadowing of a possible future way of fellowship between God and man.

9. A satisfactory answer to the question in the sense of and in motivating for the anthropomorphisms can be given only against the broader background of the relationship between God and the creation. The radical and fundamental difference between God as Creator and his creation does not prevent God from also revealing himself in cosmic images – cosmomorphisms – to mankind: God is a mountain fortress (Ps. 91:2), a stronghold (Ps. 9:10) and a rock (Deut. 32:4); He is a sun and a shield (Ps. 84:12) and light (1 John 1:5); He is a shepherd (Ps. 80:2 cf. John 10:11), He has wings (Ps. 91:4) and He rides upon a cherub and soars on the wings of the wind (Ps. 18:11). Jesus says He is a way (John 14:6) and a door (John 10:9), bread (John 6:35) and a vine (John 15:1). In these comparisons between God and a rock, wings or the sun, we certainly do not have to do with identity, but rather with analogies – heterogeneous points of support that are placed in a specific comparative relationship with each other. Why does God do this and why *can* He do it? He can do it because the entire cosmos is created by Him and thus, creatively, is already meant to praise his virtues. And He does it to reveal himself and to make himself knowable to man. In God there is refuge and safety and therefore the Scriptures can say that He is a fortress. The original is with God, and the reflection or image is with the creation. We could also say that the archetypal is with God and the atypical is with the creation.

10, But in His revelation to mankind, God goes even further, or, better stated, there is yet another aspect of the revelation: He also clothes Himself in human images. He lets people know that He has human limbs,

and that he experiences typically human emotions. How should this be understood? We must still maintain the radical difference between God as Creator and mankind as his creation. Therefore we should say that God's being and God's revelation do not coincide – even though we must immediately add that there is no tension between His being and revelation, and that His being also does not disappear as an unrecognisable greatness behind his revelation. What we have of God in his revelation is genuine and true and reliable. If the relationship between God and man is that of an analogy and not an identity, and if man has corporeality and is equipped with limbs, then God has no human corporeality and no human limbs. And yet there is a comparability between the Godly and the human way of existing and doing – hence the analogy that can be understood only from an anthropomorphic viewpoint. And this we will probably have to explain in this way: God can speak and hear and see; in other words, He has the *functions* that are indicated by the mouth and ear and eye, *without having the actual limbs himself* (cf. Ps. 94:9; Hos. 11:9). God could therefore always hear, and when He created man, He gave him an ear to be able to hear (Exod. 4:11) – first to enable him to hear God, but also to hear his fellow man. In order to ensure that mankind understands that God can in fact hear, see, speak, and so forth, He explains in his revelation about his ear, eye, mouth, and other aspects. Calvin typically uses a simple image in this regard, to explain a deep-seated truth: just as educators speak to small children in their own language, so God speaks to people in a language suited to their level of understanding. Furthermore, where a shape that is *more* than or different from his spiritual existence is attributed to God in visions, such as in Isa. 6, Ezek. 1 and Dan. 7, we should understand this as an attempt to give expression to God as a living and doing person, rather than giving just a certain representation of the capacity of God's way of existence. The man-made way of talking about God – and all talking about God has an anthropomorphic character – is not the fruit of human imagination or prophetic reflection, but of the way that God revealed himself to us as humans, and this knowledge is not identical to, but is rather analogous with, the Divine view. Therefore we must explain the anthropomorphisms emanating from the revelation. God revealed himself in human form, because He created man in the image of God.

11. God is a *personal* being. The adjective personal is used here in a broad and comprehensive sense. That God is one being and three persons, comes into play later, when we deal with the trinity. Here we wish to show that his being, although it can never be fully expressed or meaningfully described by the word 'person', is actually personal in nature and that this one being can therefore also be three persons. That God is a personal being implies that He is not an *It* or a *Something*, or an *All* or a *First Cause*, but an

Himself unfolding *I* with an unending fullness of internal characteristics. To show God as any impersonal expression would be to completely miss the actuality of his Godliness, as we meet Him in his revelation. Of course, the concept of person can never satisfactorily describe the Godly being, and it must be seen only as 'analogically adequate'. But then this means that the human person may not be created in the image of the personal representation of God. This would make God a projection of the creative spirit of man. We may not define God according to an already given and fulfilled concept of person. Rather it is God who fills the concept of 'person' with a specific content. Admittedly, in the Bible people do talk *about* God; however, mostly they talk *with* God. And even where they talk about Him, this talking is not detached and neutral, but rather existential: in the knowledge that the existence of God is an appealing existence – it does not oblige man, who also has God to thank for his own being as a person, to make a specific positional choice about Him. As *I*, God is then an *opposite* with regard to his creation and man can address Him as *You*. As a personal *I*, God is not only a living being, but also a doing/acting being. The description of *his* in freedom-fulfilling actions should even be a central theme of the entire Scriptures. His actions are not the automatic occurrences of a will-less being but are instead deliberate and planned. He creates consciously because He wants to create, and He creates with a purpose. His plan in regard to the world is inclusive: it does not exclude, and in fact rather includes, mankind and man's resolve and planning. This is why the relationship of God and man – also illustrated concretely in the covenant – is dialogical in nature, and this dialogical solidarity with man of course finds its climax in the incarnation of God, where He comes to man as the incarnate Word, and calls man to an answerable and therefore responsible personal existence. This suggests action and reaction: God who acts and man who also acts in accordance with this. God speaks, commands, promises, seeks, punishes, forgives, and loves. Man listens or doesn't listen, is obedient or is not obedient, comes to God or flees from Him, bows before Him or resists Him, praises Him or curses Him. God takes the initiative in this relationship, and however man may react, whether positively or negatively, He retains the initiative and eventually reaches His goal. The person who refuses to fall in with God's plan will not derail that plan. God continues with His plan, because God is God.

God *is* and God *acts* personally, therefore his dealings with man are described in personal categories. And with this Person-being of God, there is no contradiction or conflict with any other of his characteristics.

12. God is a *transcendental-immanent* being. In the deepest sense of the word, God is the only one that is *in* the world but is not *of* the world. He is not *of* the world, because He is the Creator of the world. As Creator, he

is radically different from the works of his hands (Ps. 102:26; Isa. 40:18; 1 Kings 8:60; cf. James 1:17, 18). He dwells in an inaccessible light (1 Tim. 6:16) and even heaven, where he has his throne (Ps. 103:19), cannot contain him (1 Kings 8:27). The reality of God is at odds with created reality, and then not in a purely static-spatial way, but rather in a dynamic one: creative-supportive with regard to the created reality, critical-judgmental in regard to the sinful reality, and merciful-conciliatory towards a penitent reality. He is qualitatively different, greater and more glorious even than any form in which he has shown himself – including in the human form: as Jesus of Nazareth. Never was he ever absorbed by creation, or manipulatively objectified, even when He, in his merciful wisdom, became Jesus Christ the man. We may also say: He did not leave heaven when He became man. God reigns sovereign over His creation, and therefore can never be locked in, or limited to, or in any way bounded by, his own creation.

The aspect of the Godly existence that we have emphasised up to this point is that of the transcendental. But inseparably attached to that, there is a second aspect that must be mentioned, namely the immanent. The latter aspect is, of course, not a rescinding of the former, but rather an enhancement to it. God exists on the other side of a creative frontier – and He never ever crosses this border, but on the other side is not the *outside* of the created reality. He also exists on the inside of this border, but in the same way as on the other side. This is the immanence of God. In Isaiah, God himself says: 'I live in the highest and in the safest place and with the broken and humble of spirit ...' (57:15). And Jesus says: 'If a man loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling in him' (John 14:23). God is *above* history and at the same time also *in* history; but being *in* history, he does not stop being *above* history. He is *in* the world, and *different* from the world, just as He is still God even when He is Jesus the man. God is in the world, in material, in plant, in animal, and in man, without any 'trans-substantiation' taking place – to borrow a word from the Roman Catholic Communion teaching. A simple image may help one to understand something of the mystery: the coin that the child has swallowed does not become flesh or blood, it remains a piece of metal. The Creator working in the world does not become one with that which He has created.

*Both God's transcendence and His immanence must be sustained simultaneously and undiminished. Whoever emphasises his immanence alone runs the risk of lowering, in a pantheistic sense, the reality of God to a perspective of mere created reality. And whoever emphasises his transcendence alone allows the reality of God to disappear into the unknown, while God-like qualities are given to the created reality*

(theism). In the model prayer, Jesus taught us the unity of these two perspectives in a striking way: 'Our Father (immanence) who is in Heaven' (transcendence).

13. The concept of heaven is used with different meanings. We will return to this when we learn about creation. At this point we are just pointing out the fact that the Bible often presents God as the God of Heaven: Ps. 33:13, 14, 103:19, 115:3, 136:26; Dan. 2:18; Jon. 1:9; Isa. 63:15; Deut. 4:36; Mark 1:11, Matt. 5:48, 6:9. In these and in other texts, the concept is expressed that heaven is where God lives. In this view, the emphasis is first and foremost on God's majesty and glory, his radical uniqueness and exaltedness, his holiness and inaccessibility. God is not of this world, but of another world, and therefore the concept of heaven is used. To express this aspect of God's being, another concept could be used, but in the deepest unfathomable mystery of the created heaven, an image is found that can be comprehended and that suits all people. God is eternal and omnipresent, and this is why the place cannot be a fixed one. This is why Solomon could pray upon the dedication of the temple: 'Look, the heavens, yes, the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house that I have built' (1 Kings 8:27). And Paul could say to the Greeks: 'The God who made this world and everything that is in it, He who is the Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by hands' (Acts 17:24). Nevertheless, this free and unfettered God is yet present in a specific way. First, of course in the man, Jesus. In Jesus, God found a time-and-space dwelling, where the fullness of the deity is physically present (Col. 2:9, 1:19). But then the Bible also often mentions places where God makes himself known in a special way, and where people experience his presence as a complete surprise. At Bet-el, Jacob called the 'terrible place' a house of God, which he experienced as a 'gateway to heaven' (Gen. 28:16, 17). But God also dwells in a burning bush (Exod. 3:2ff; Deut. 33:16), on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:16), amidst his people (Exod. 25:8, 29:45, 46; Num. 5:3; 1 Kings 6:13; Ezek. 43:7), in Jerusalem (1 Chron. 23:25; Ezra 1:34), and on Zion (Ps. 9:12, 74:2, 132:13, 14). That God is present in Christ or in specific places is not, however, what is meant by the expression: *God is in heaven*. This does indicate a specific way or a place of being present, but then not a presence, on the basis of becoming man or of the revelation. Heaven is God's dwelling place, and still more closely described: heaven is the *where* of God's existence and the *from whence* of his acts. God is in heaven and from heaven; He acts without ever leaving heaven. From heaven, God looks down on the earth; He rules, and He reigns (Ps. 33:13, 14). Therefore heaven is not merely an indication of a place, but rather a dynamic point of departure: He is there, and He acts from there. Heaven is the indication of God's presence and

action, not based on or in his incarnation or revelation, but based on his essence. We are thus also able to say: where God is, heaven is, although the opposite cannot be claimed as a result of nuances of meaning in relation to the concept of heaven. As *God-in-heaven* he is also *God-on-earth* – he does not ever exist in any other way than as *God-in-heaven*, even when He is in a person's heart. That God is not a converging, indwelling Being in the creation, but a Being that is radically different from the work of his hands, is expressed in the declaration that God is in heaven. But in this all-encompassing declaration of reverence, it is not emphasised only that heaven is God's glorious dwelling that is naturally closed to the child of man, but also that He has opened, and still opens, heaven to the children of man without this causing heaven to stop being the centre and middle point from which Godly life shines forth.

### 3. Trinity of God

1. *That* the singular and only spiritual being that we call God is also a personal God, we heard in the previous section. *How* He exists as a personal God is described more closely in what is known as the study of the Trinity of God. Here, perhaps more than in any other doctrine in the dogma, human limitations become so overwhelming, especially with regard to insight and concepts, that absolute silence appears to be the only correct and appropriate reaction. And yet we are called to approach even this holy topic of the nature of God's personal existence in a thoughtful and systematic manner. As in all other sections of doctrine, we are of course also directed exclusively to the revelation, and yet we must – as has in fact also happened in the past – make use of concepts that do *not* originate from the revelation. This makes the task of formulation so difficult, and in fact also gives it something of a still preliminary character.

2. The classical definition of the Trinity is that God is one being and three persons (*una substantia tres personae*), yet neither of the two key words *being* or *persons* is used in the Scriptures to refer to God. This has led on the one hand to a total rejection of the Trinity of God and on the other hand to an imaginative, but non-Biblical, speculation about the Trinity – which we will get to later.

3. Whenever there is mention of three *persons* in relation to God, the concept of *person* should not be handled according to any kind of philosophical or psychological context, nor should it be dealt with according to what is currently understood by personality, namely a characteristic of an independent individual with a consciousness of self and possibilities of self-determination. For Calvin, *person* in this context simply meant: (a) a way of life or an independence (*subsistentia*) that (b)

exists in the essence of God, (c) has a specific relationship to the ways of existence below, and (d) is distinguished from others by characteristics that cannot be shared.

4. What evidence is there in the Scriptures that can be offered for the trinity of the divine *Persons*? In this connection, first a general remark on the Scriptural evidence of the Old Testament: that the Old Testament only, or even mainly, emphasises the unity of the Divine Being, while the trinity of the Persons is not encountered here, is not correct. The Three-in-one is not a given exclusively in the New Testament. But what is certainly true is that the trinity of Persons is still not found clearly or visibly in the Old Testament. As is the case with many other truths, greater clarity has come only with the progress of historical revelation. This does not for one moment imply that God was not already a trinitarian God in Old Testament times – He has always been a Trinity. It was just that in the Old Testament, this was not as clearly revealed. Therefore, in this regard, the Old Testament texts need to be interpreted from the point of view of the New Testament.

5. Instead of a trinity of persons, we find references to the plurality of God in the following texts. According to Gen. 1:2 it is not God who glides over the waters, but the *Spirit of God*. In light of much other information, this ‘Something’ or ‘Someone’ of God cannot be the ‘wind’ or the ‘breath’ of God, but must be the Holy Spirit. Not only does the Spirit of God go forth and represent Him, but He is also viewed as an independent being alongside God (Judg. 3:10; Isa. 61:1; Ps. 33:6) that can be changed by a disobedient people into an enemy that contends against them (Isa. 63:9, 10). Yet the people received a promise from God that his Spirit will remain in their midst if they repent (Hag. 2:5). When God says: Let Us make man ... (Gen. 1:26 cf. Gen. 3:22), this is not a plurality of majesty, and God is not addressing the angels here, or, in a polytheistic sense, other gods as fellow creators, but is rather an indication of the fullness of life that God has in Himself and shares in fellowship with Himself (Isa. 6:8; Luke 1:21). In various texts we hear of the *Angel of the Lord* (*malak Jahwe*), who not only represents the Lord as Messenger, but who, as visible manifestation of God, is one with Him on the one hand, and yet is also separate from Him (Gen. 16; Exod. 3; Judges 5:23; Num. 22; Judges 13; cf. Isa. 63:9). As opposed to the Spirit, who is more of power that is independent or going forth from the Lord, that fulfils man and brings man into motion, the Angel of the Lord is more a personal representative who carries messages. We find a similar suggestion in the ‘*glory of God*’ and the ‘*face of God*’. This is identified as being with God on the one hand, and as independent alongside God on the other (Exod. 33:18ff). More clearly, we find the indication of Christ in the prophetic prediction of his coming (cf. Isa. 9:5) and unmistakably in



the prophecy of the pouring out of the Spirit in Isa. 32:15 (cf. Ezek. 36:27; Joel 2:28).

6. In the following texts, the plurality is depicted clearly as a trinity: Jesus says to his disciples 'Baptise them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19, cf. Eph. 1:17). In a certain sense it is also a summary of what Jesus learned about the Father and the Holy Spirit during his earthly life. He speaks many times of being of and with the Father (among others, Matt. 11:25–27, 16:17; Mark 13:32) and of the Spirit (Mark 13:11; Luke 11:13, 12:12; John 12:27, 14:26, 15:26, 16:13). But also in the rest of the New Testament, we read of the Father (Acts 2:33; Rom. 1:7; Eph. 2:18; 1 John 1:2), the Son (Matt. 11:19; Mark 2:28; John 10:36, 11:4; Rom. 1:4) and the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2, 2:33; Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 2:13; Hebr. 2:4).

7. This trinity in God has different commonalities: not one of Them is less or more than *God*, but all three receive divine honour and worship; all three are represented as *persons*; and all three *act* to the inside and to the outside. But each of them also has an unshareable individuality and, together with that, an unchangeable identity. The *Father* is not the Son or the Holy Spirit. He also does not arise from the Son or the Holy Spirit. He sends forth the Son and the Spirit and is not sent forth by Them to the world. The *Son* is not the Father or the Holy Spirit. He does go forth from the Father, but not from the Spirit. He alone is the Word through whom creation is done and who in the fullness of time became man. The *Holy Spirit* is not the Son or the Father. He is the only one that goes forth from the Father and from the Son, and he is poured upon man on Pentecost Day.

8. A particular task is attached to each of the three Persons, without the other two being completely excluded from these tasks. The *Father* is responsible for *creation*, although the Son and the Holy Spirit are also involved in this (1 Cor. 12:6; 1 Cor. 8:6; Isa. 64:8; Matt. 10:29; John 5:17; John 6:32; John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16; Gen. 1:2; Ps. 33:6; Ps. 104:30). The *Son* is responsible for *salvation*, although the Father and the Spirit are also involved in this (John 1:29; Rom. 3:24; John 10:29, 25, 37; Luke 1:35; John 16:13). The *Holy Spirit* is responsible for fulfilment, although the Father and the Son are also involved in this (Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:10, 13, 23; 3:19; 1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 1:22).

9. In the light of the abovementioned, we may now summarise as follows: *as a being, God is individual, but as a person, He is a trinity*. The Persons in God are not mere characteristics but are eternally divine ways of existence who all share fully the entire divine Being, which is still one in number, with all of its virtues and perfections. The division of Persons therefore does not mean that there is a division of the Divine Being – that

would mean that there was a triad of gods (tri-theism). But while each Person is the Divine Being, and therefore in both essence and intent fully equal (*homo-ousioi*), each Person nevertheless has an unshareable characteristic: the Father has his Fatherhood (*paternitas*), the Son has his Son-ship (*filiatio*), and the Holy Spirit has his point of departure (*spiratio*) from the Father and from the Son. From this there appears to be an irreversible order in the relationship of the three Persons to each other, upon the grounds of which we talk about the Father as the first, the Son as the second, and the Holy Spirit as the third Person. However there is no suggestion at any time of any form of isolation or separateness of the Persons in relation to each other. Quite the opposite. The unity of the Persons will even have to be seen as a mutual penetration of each other (*perichoresis* or *communio divinarum personarum*). Furthermore, the implication is that the fixed order in which the three Persons exist has no single gradation according to which one Person would be higher or somehow more than the others, who would then be lower or less. Each idea of subordinationism is rendered principally impossible by a biblical trinity doctrine.

10, The question of whether the trinity of Persons, as we have learned to know God in his revelation, is also a trinity in God himself, was answered in the negative in approximately the year 200 by Sabellius, who originated from Africa. According to Sabellius, God has two major characteristics, namely expansion and contraction. Through the expansion a multiplicity originates that is referred to as the triad of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while through the contraction, this multiplicity is resolved into the single, individual Divine Being (the *Monas*). The three Persons therefore do not always exist *alongside each other* but originated historically in succession *after each other* and also in such a way that when the dispensation of the Father was ended in the Old Testament, He disappeared as the Father and the Son then appeared. After this, the Son also disappeared and then the Holy Spirit appeared. The trinity of the revelation is therefore not at the same time an immanent or ontic trinity. The three Persons are consequently only three temporary modes of existence of the singular Divinity – from which the term modalism is derived. In this presentation the concept of ‘person’ goes back to the original meaning of the Greek word *prosopon*, in other words, ‘mask’. How it became ‘person’ from here on, is obvious. The actor could thus imitate different people by changing his mask. The mask is therefore an artificial face that is used for a specific purpose. The transition from ‘face’ to ‘person’ is also obvious, because the face is seen as the outward appearance of a person’s inner being, thus representing the whole person. Sabellius prefers to use the word *prosopon* so that this presentation – later also defended by Marcellus

of Ancyra, Joachim of Fiore, Schleiermacher, and R. Seeberg, among others – can properly be described as the prosoponic, in other words, as the masking trinity view. From as far back as the year 218, the church on many occasions made its objection to this un-Biblical presentation of the Trinity of God very clear.

11. The meaning of the confession of the Divine Trinity is so huge and so fundamental that it is difficult to express in words. As a doctrine about the Divine way of existence, it gives an indication – it cannot and does not wish to be more than this – of the unfathomable depths and richness of life and fellowship in God himself. He is the true Life, in Whom there is unity in the variety, and variety in the unity; in Whom both order and harmony are present in absolute perfection. Indeed, God has so much in and of Himself that He certainly does not need creation. Understood in this way, the Trinity provides the evidence of the self-sufficiency of God and the insignificance of the entire creation. But in fact, just because of that, we learn from this the vast background to creation: the origin of the Father, the execution and salvation by the Son, and the consummation by the Holy Spirit: with this one creation this same God keeps himself busy in triplicate, to his honour and glorification!

The triune God is not the transcendent of the historically developing process of the world, and He is even less the cosmic-immanent principle of being. He is the transcendent Creator and Sustainer in Jesus Christ as Saviour and in the Holy Spirit as Consummator immanent in the cosmos, and yet also in very essence different from the creation. In Himself he unites the constant movement of the *generatio* of the Son and the *spiratio* of the Holy Spirit as the foundation of the creation and his revelation to the outside. In brief: the doctrine of the Trinity celebrates the fullness of the Divine life in theology!

As an essential part of theology, the doctrine of the Trinity also establishes the indispensable foundation for all other doctrines but especially for Christology and Pneumatology. Those who do not understand in the doctrine of the Trinity that the Son and the Holy Spirit together with the Father, that God is forever, may easily fall into a glorification of the man Jesus in Christology, and will end up in a superficial moralism; and in may see in Pneumatology the Holy Spirit as a Divine power and thus drown spiritually in the swamp of mysticism.

To sum up, the heart of Christian religion is to be found in the Trinity doctrine. Because through the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the revelation of God to the salvation of mankind is made possible.



## The Living God

John de Gruchy

*Being led into mystery ... is participating in something that transcends and ultimately overwhelms us as we struggle with matters of life and death, love and justice, faith and justice ... and in the process become more fully human.<sup>1</sup>*

*Christian hope ... is not dependent on any inherent human capacity we may have, but on ... the cosmic mystery we name God disclosed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Christ as unfathomable love and infinite beauty.<sup>2</sup>*

Our elder son, Steve, tragically died in a river accident on Sunday 21 February 2010. He was 48 years old and was, at the time of his death, a professor of theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In the weeks and months that followed, I sought the words to express my grief and, at the same time, developed a dogged unwillingness to surrender hope. I knew that the enemy of faith is not doubt, but an unwillingness to acknowledge doubt. I had also learnt over the years that hope is not wishful thinking or optimism, but a question posed by faith in a world that gives so much cause for despair and lament. Writing *Led into Mystery* was one of the ways I attempted to own my grief, to examine and express my faith and hope through an ongoing conversation with Steve, but it was also an experience of being led into this mystery. Much of the material that follows has its origin in *Led into Mystery*, but it also embodies further reflection on the issues as the months have passed, especially in the first essay, 'Owning Grief'.

### 1. Owning grief: a journey into mystery

To grieve is to be human. Owning grief is an intensely personal and often a lonely journey, but it can also be a communal experience in which one is embraced, and in which new relationships are formed and old ones deepened, not least with others who have also experienced the death of a

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1 *Led into Mystery* 21.

2 *Ibid.* 214.

son or daughter. Children should not die before their parents die. But they often do, even in this day and age, at birth. Since Steve's death I have often thought of the many parents who daily grieve the death of their children in countless places where disease, war, terror and genocide have shattered their lives. Or the parents of those children who starve to death before their eyes on the barren landscape of perpetual drought. Or those dying painful deaths because drugs are unavailable to cure or soothe the pain. Or those who mourn the death of a loved one who committed suicide. The possible scenarios are endless. Each has to own their own grief. But I cannot begin to imagine how those do so who have no support, those who have lost all hope and those unable even to shed tears.

There are neurological explanations for the process of grieving. Traumatic experiences trigger off chemicals in the brain that enable us to cope. Tears are a biological reaction to pain as they are to ecstasy. This is part of being human and why repression of grieving and tears is unhealthy. We are preventing the brain from functioning normally. But grieving cannot simply be explained as the activity of molecules at work in the brain. Grieving is the activity of my 'self', or more meaningfully, my 'soul', understood not as a discrete ghost-like being located somewhere in my body, but in complex, dynamic and relational terms.<sup>3</sup> This accords with the biblical view that human beings are constantly changing psychosomatic wholes in relation to God, the world and others. We grieve because relationships that give meaning to our lives come to an end as we have known them, even if they may continue in a new way and be restored in ways beyond understanding.

Grief accompanies us through life; it is part of the human condition. We grieve if we have hurt others, especially those we love. We shed tears when our children leave home, or when we move from a house of wonderful memories in which we have lived for years, or when we say goodbye to family and friends after holidays together, or when we say farewell to colleagues with whom we have worked over many years. George Eliot reminds us that 'in every parting there is an image of death'.<sup>4</sup> For death is the defining moment of parting. Yet if we grieve in hope, we do not have to accept that our relationship with those who have died has ended.

The idea that the process of grief comes to an end, that there is some kind of final closure, is only partially true.<sup>5</sup> Yes, there will come a time when the dead move beyond our horizon as our memory grows dim and

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3 Ibid. 159–165.

4 Eliot 1985:70.

5 See Oliver 2013:11.

fails us, for grief is contingent on remembering.<sup>6</sup> But we cannot disown our grief any more than we can get over loving someone we truly loved.<sup>7</sup> If we truly own our grief, it becomes part of our journey in life, an expression of love that endures even though it changes character as we weave new futures and maybe enter new relationships. It is a journey into the mystery that lies at the heart of the universe to which we refer when we utter the word 'God', inadequate as it is to encompass all that it is meant to convey.

The early Christian fathers and mothers well knew that theology, like grief counselling, begins in silence, not in asking questions and demanding answers. Not the stony silence of hostility, or the silence experienced by those who are totally deaf, those unable to hear even the gentle song of a small bird at dawn. It is the silence that enables us to listen for the Word of grace. Grieving teaches us that listening in the silence to the heartbeat of those who weep, and discerning in their pain the heartbeat of the vulnerable God who grieves in solidarity with them and a world in need is the first step into the mystery of God embodied in human flesh.

## 2. Mystery hidden and disclosed

The word 'mystery' has multiple, layered meanings. But it is also, as Karl Rahner tells us, 'one of the most important key-words of Christianity and its theology'.<sup>8</sup> Doing theology, he says, is being drawn back into mystery. But it is not a short-cut way of solving problems, nor should we take refuge in mystery too soon when faced with the challenges presented to faith by reason and science. Rather, it is to acknowledge that doing theology is more than intellectual enquiry; it is participating in something that ultimately overwhelms us as we struggle with matters of life and death, love and justice, faith and hope. But the journey into mystery is not one that takes us into the realm of the ethereal. It is neither other-worldly nor ahistorical; it is being encountered by and engaging reality differently as human beings in solidarity with all creation, with all living beings, with God.<sup>9</sup>

My sense of being led into mystery began in a new way the day I sat beside the river right where Steve had drowned and where his body still lay trapped. But from early on my brain chemistry began processing and interpreting my experience in a particular way, calling forth a theological response. At one level, my response was simply faith seeking answers, and therefore no different from what we normally do when thinking

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6 See Vanauken 1977:231.

7 See Verhey 2011:342.

8 Rahner 1975:1000.

9 Kelly 1991:335.



theologically, whether in the seminar room or in parish ministry. Of course, to begin with there was no systematic attempt to answer the questions, no possibility that I could stand back and reflect on the painfully raw data of my experience. The best I could do was to let the questions come and go, neither repressing nor trying to answer them, but bracketing them, putting them into cold storage and holding them in abeyance for the time being. I had to allow the resources of faith to hold me together rather than trying to make sense of what had happened.

The same is true for others who grieve. Even though we sit in silent solidarity with them as we must, questions are already implicit, even if not expressed. Why does God permit such suffering? Is this God's will? What is the meaning of life if it all leads to this sad conclusion? Is there a God? Why did she die so young? Did my sin bring this about? And, behind all these inevitable questions, did God raise Jesus from the dead? Is there good reason to love God, or only reason to despair and fear God, even hate God, even hate the word 'God' and all that it has come to signify? These are all important questions that take us to the heart of theological enquiry, but the answers of conventional wisdom are inadequate, especially when pronounced with dogmatic certainty and uncritical biblical proof texting.

Of all the questions, the most perplexing into which we are inevitably led in our grief is that of the mystery of God's agency and the mystery of evil. Why does God seem so impotent in the face of human suffering? Is tragedy God's will? There are reasonable responses to the problem that carry some explanatory weight. If God is God, then surely somehow, somewhere, amidst such tragic events, God must be present even if hidden, otherwise, as Desmond Tutu has said, 'God is God's Worst Enemy'.<sup>10</sup> But there is no 'solution' this side of eternity,<sup>11</sup> for the problem 'remains unjust and inexplicable, haphazard and cruelly excessive', or at the very least, a mystery 'impenetrable to the rationalizing human mind'.<sup>12</sup> That is why any attempt to justify God's permitting of human suffering, must begin with the suffering of God in Christ as the revelation of the mystery of who God is.

It has become commonplace to speak of the crucified God, the suffering God, the God who stands in solidarity with all who mourn. But how is it possible for the almighty creator of heaven and earth to be vulnerable and suffer? Before rushing into glibly attempting to answer that question, we would do well to remember that the idea that God could

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10 In the first Steve de Gruchy Memorial Lecture, held in the Rondebosch United Church, Cape Town, 24 April 2012.

11 Hick 1968:398.

12 Ibid. 371.

suffer was a major problem for ancient theologians. This is neither the time nor place to engage in that debate. But at the very least, we should pause on the threshold of this perplexing question, for we stand before what is undoubtedly at the heart of the mystery of God. This was part of the reason why the church fathers spoke of the mystery of the triune God.

The narrative of the Trinitarian God paradoxically affirms God's freedom and power, and God's kenotic love and compassion as distinct yet inseparable. God is neither subject to the passions of the ancient divinities, nor incapable of suffering with humanity.<sup>13</sup> The shift from a divinity who is impassive to the incarnate mystery of the crucified God provides a penultimate clue as to why God so often seems silent as we previously noted. God's silence is not the silence of absence or apathy, but the silence of one who grieves totally because God loves absolutely. It is part of the mystery into which we are led, the mystery of the cross as the outpouring of love. 'For God loved the world so much that he gave his only son' (John 3:16). How could God not grieve? In his poem written in prison, 'Christians and heathens', Bonhoeffer writes about how we all turn to God in our time of need, and how God in turn comes to us. But in the middle verse he says this:

*People go to God when God's in need,  
find God poor, reviled, without shelter or bread,  
see God devoured by sin, weakness and death.  
Christians go to God in his hour of grieving<sup>14</sup>*

The journey into the mystery of God's grief and therefore love is integral to the journey of the 'self' or 'soul' from brokenness into wholeness, the reintegration of body, mind and soul in Christ. In other words, the process of grief should not be understood as something distinct *from*, but rather distinct *within* the journey of both life and faith, of dying and rebirth, of death and resurrection. A long and sometimes painful journey lies along what is sometimes described as the 'way of unknowing'.

### 3. The way of unknowing

The way of 'unknowing' begins when it dawns on us that God is beyond our knowing, and therefore that the answers to ultimate questions are also beyond our grasp. To say that the answers are ultimately beyond our grasp

<sup>13</sup> Hart 2003:166–167.

<sup>14</sup> I have used an earlier translation of the last line, that from the 1971 enlarged edition of *LPP*, 349. In the new edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison*, it reads: 'Christians stand by God in God's own pain (Leiden)', 461.

is not the same as saying that there are no penultimate intimations that shed light on our path. Christian faith in the mystery of God revealed in Jesus is not irrational and blind. But it insists that reason cannot proceed without faith, and that faith needs reason to understand itself. Our enquiry into the questions of life and death in the penultimate and the insight that we are given now are connected to the ultimate, even though not yet final or complete. The meaning of life and death are inseparably connected; the meaning of death is discovered in the meaning of life. This is what eternal life as present reality is about.

There is a connection, then, between what reason illumined by faith enables us to discern now and the ultimate revelation of the mystery when we know even as we are known, for now '(w)e only know in part; but then we will know fully' (I Cor. 13:12). But it is only in the end that the mystery is revealed in its fullness, when we know even as we are known. But now, as we journey through life, the revelation of the mystery of God in Jesus Christ does not mean that everything we want to know is disclosed to us, but that everything we need to know for each step of the way is made known to us as we travel. That is why we can only be justified by the faith that we share with Abraham, who went out not knowing where he was going, but trusting in the God of promise and hope who grieves in solidarity with us.

The journey along the path of unknowing into this mystery is about lived theology, whether in ordinary time or on boundaries of human experience, and about being drawn painfully yet joyfully into the embrace of a love and beauty that is both disclosed yet always exceeding what we can fathom. Only this ultimate reality is worthy of the name 'God', and therefore of our worship, that which makes us 'pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe'.<sup>15</sup> Only then, in contemplation and reflection, can we begin to discern honest answers to the questions that confront us through theological enquiry, but always knowing that those that trip off our tongues are inadequate, specious, and sometimes downright unhelpful and even hurtful. At best they can only be preliminary, penultimate. We know that, because our answers to the questions of others do not necessarily convince us when we suffer or grieve, so why would they convince anyone else who wants to know why God has forsaken them? It is only believers who can get angry with God and struggle with doubt. Atheists and agnostics who ask questions that imply God, meaning, purpose, are not true to their convictions and must surely be closet or would-be believers. But a genuine, lively faith in God does not answer all our questions; it makes them more complex, urgent and demanding.

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15 Einstein 2002.

In owning my grief and counselling others, I soon discovered that asking questions led to more questions rather than watertight answers, and these became part of the quest, an opening up and a deepening of the mystery into which I was being led. Is this not Job's experience? In answer to his questions, God confronts him with even more, virtually assaulting his agonised consciousness with a torrent of demands: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ... I will question you, and you shall declare to me' (Job 38:2–3).

Those of us who are theologically trained may think we know the answers until we shift from being Job's comforters to being Job himself, from sitting with others who grieve, to being those who grieve. Initially, we cannot even begin to answer the questions they are asking, not even for ourselves. We have to travel deeper into mystery with them as we listen to their anguished cries for answers and shed tears with them. And perhaps only when we have haltingly begun to own our own grief, uttered our own cries of desolation and shed our own tears do we really know that there are no easy answers. Somewhere deep within us we acknowledge that the profound and mysterious reality we have embraced in 'faith' was holding on to us. Christians refer to this as the mystery of God's grace disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, God remains an unfathomable mystery even when revealed, for what is revealed is what we need to know about God, not everything there is to be known, or that we would like to know. Jesus as the revelation of God is truly God but not the whole of God; in Jesus, God is at the same time hidden and revealed from the cradle to the cross.

Faith in God as an unfathomable mystery disclosed yet hidden in Christ implies a commitment to the journey into God as the one 'in whom we live, move and have our being'. This journey leads us more deeply into reality, not away from it, for whatever else the word 'God' may mean, it refers to ultimate reality. Such faith is therefore a commitment to love that has to be made every day within the realities of the world. It is not a certainty that we possess, but a certainty that comes to possess us, the mystery of grace that makes believing and loving possible in the first place.

The unending quest of science and the theological sense of being led along the path of unknowing into mystery are analogous and converge even though usually expressed differently. When Einstein says that the 'most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious', and that this is 'the source of all true art and all science', he is referring to that ultimate mystery which transcends art, science and theological enquiry itself. Being led into mystery requires openness to the possibility of such transcendence. When religion or science turn in on themselves, close the

door of the sanctuary or laboratory to mystery, lose their ability to wonder, their childlike capacity to trust, they become idolatrous, dehumanising, and destructive. 'The lack of mystery in our modern life,' wrote Bonhoeffer, 'means decay and impoverishment for us. A human life is of worth to the extent that it keeps respect for mystery'.<sup>16</sup> To lose respect for mystery is to lose respect for life, for the creation, for the other, for God. It is to become cynical, nihilistic, incapable of hope, a washing of our hands from political responsibility and action. To respect mystery is to remain hopeful that what has been revealed will be fulfilled, even if in ways that take us by surprise, for that is the nature of mystery.

#### 4. Grieving in hope

In *Led into Mystery*, I examine in some detail how I understand Christian hope, and how this connects to our life in the world and the struggle for justice and peace, and to the integrity of creation and the ultimate restoration of all things. Believing in the resurrection of Christ means that in the darkest times of personal tragedy or political violence, we affirm that God's purpose for the well-being of creation will not finally be thwarted. In exploring this hope, I also examine such notions as the immortality of the soul, the meaning of heaven and its connection with the earth, the resurrection of the body and political reality. This is not the place to repeat all that I say there, but what I say there provides the background for these final comments.

Paul's description of the whole creation groaning in labour pains waiting for the birth of a 'new creation', or a 'new heaven and a new earth' evokes in us an awareness that our grieving is cosmic in dimension. The whole cosmos, it would appear, is grieving its own degradation at the hands of humanity and, in doing so, recognises that its future well-being is bound up with the hope of humanity's redemption (Romans 8:18–25). This hope is firmly planted on the earth yet is cosmic in expectation, intensely personal but is at the same time interconnected 'in Christ'. Christian hope, in other words, is penultimately related to all our struggles for justice and peace in this world, and ultimately to the restoration of all things. It is only within this framework that we can make sense of the New Testament data and the personal confession of faith in the 'resurrection of the body and the life eternal'. The hope that is within us humans is profoundly related to the hope of creation as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

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16 Bonhoeffer Letters and Papers from Prison 2007:360.

17 See Romans 8:18–25.

What happens to you or me, or anyone else after death, Bonhoeffer tells us, is not the central, framing question of the Bible.<sup>18</sup> There are, he says, 'more important things than this question'.<sup>19</sup> The Christian belief in the 'resurrection of the body' has to do with the continuity of identity in relationships within the context of a new creation, not with the resuscitation of our physical bodies of bone, flesh and blood in individual glory. John Polkinghorne, a physicist and a theologian, writes:

*In natural terms, the pattern that is me, whatever form it actually takes, will be dissolved at my death, as my body decays and my relationships are reduced simply to the fading retention of memories by others. Yet it seems an entirely coherent belief that the everlastingly faithful God will hold that pattern perfectly preserved in the divine memory, and then embody it in the ultimate divine eschatological act of resurrection at the last day, as the new creation enters into the unfolding fullness of time.<sup>20</sup>*

If this is so, then 'God's remembering, recognizing, and relating to me' is, as Nancey Murphy says, 'essential to my post-resurrection identity'.<sup>21</sup> But personal identity is meaningful only if it includes 'self-recognition, continuity of moral character, and personal relations, both with others and with God'.<sup>22</sup> This is what the resurrection hope we have in Christ means for us.

The disclosure of God's mysterious purpose is the substance of Christian hope, as can be seen in passages where Paul speaks about the glory that is still to be revealed, and for which the whole creation 'waits with eager longing' (Romans 8:19). Likewise, to the Colossians, Paul writes about the 'riches of the glory of this mystery' revealed in the gospel, 'which is Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Colossians 1:27). He also writes about our waiting in hope for the 'redemption of our bodies' which we do not yet see, and concludes with the rhetorical question: 'For who hopes for that which is seen?' What believers know is that what is not yet seen has already been disclosed in the gospel. But even then, it remains unfathomable mystery: 'For who knows the mind of the Lord?' asks Paul (Romans 11:34). His judgments are unsearchable and his ways inscrutable. There are things not revealed, things that remain hidden until the end. Yet the end has already been anticipated. The mystery still to be revealed will

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18 See Wright 2011:197.

19 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 373.

20 Polkinghorne 2002:52.

21 Murphy 2002:213.

22 Ibid. 208.

not be contrary to that already disclosed in Christ; it will be the unveiling of that mystery in its entirety.

In prison, Bonhoeffer came to accept the fragmentary character of life and his impending death. He also discerned that 'that which is fragmentary may point to a higher fulfilment, which can no longer be achieved by human effort'. That was the only way he could think about the death of so many of his former students in the war.<sup>23</sup> In doing so, Bonhoeffer refers to Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation in a passage to which I have frequently returned since the death of Steve:

*Nothing is lost; in Christ all things are taken up, preserved, albeit in transfigured form, transparent, clear, liberated from the torment of self-serving demands. Christ brings all this back, indeed, as God intended, without being distorted by sin. The doctrine originating in Ephesians 1:10 of the restoration of all things – re-capitulatio (Irenaeus) – is a magnificent and consummately consoling thought<sup>24</sup>*

In the end, Christian hope is the anticipation that the fragments of life, the fragments that we are as human beings, the fragments that we become in death, will be brought to completion as we are finally led into in the ultimate mystery of an unfathomable love that embraces us in life and death. That is our hope, a hope that does not repress grief, does not exclude tears, does not deny pain, but enables us to see beyond them and live in anticipation with the whole of creation of the magnificent work that God is yet to do. Hope is, after all, imagining something different to despair and death. If our belief in God means anything at all, it will transcend all expectation and open up a totally new dimension to our relationship with those we continue to remember and love within the memory and love of God. Only then will the mystery into which we are being led be fully and finally fulfilled. And only then, as John on Patmos perceived as he gazed into the mystery of God's future for us, will 'mourning and crying and pain be no more' (Rev. 22:4).

## 5. God as ultimate mystery

If theology ... is about our knowledge of God and ourselves, it is appropriate that I should end this collection of essays with some reflections on the subject. At the outset, let me say that our knowledge of God is not the outcome of reason, however important that is for understanding; it is a knowledge that derives from faith questioning itself. Faith is not blind;

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23 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 301.

24 Ibid. 230.



it is always open to scrutiny, but it is not a mental exercise objectively pursued and scientifically verified. It is a life lived in commitment, not to a vague, nebulous idea, or a system of religion and philosophy, but to the claims made by the mystery we call 'God' within a particular mythos or narrative, a transcendent Word that gives meaning to life. But who is this God in whom we questioningly believe and therefore trust?

## 6. Imaging God

The *concept* 'God' has a history.<sup>25</sup> Of course, it is our *understanding* of God which evolves, not God, just as our understanding may also regress. This was in Nietzsche's mind when he castigated the *Christian* God as the 'God of all the dark corners and places, of all unhealthy quarters throughout the world', and went on to declare that 'it even represents the low-water mark of the descending development of the God type' because it came to represent the '*contradiction of life*, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes!<sup>26</sup>

The God revealed to Moses at the 'burning bush', as told in Exodus 3, is beyond human control or imagining. God is who God is, 'I am who I am' – YHWH. But even though image making, as the first commandment insists, is idolatrous, the Bible describes YHWH in a wealth of metaphors or verbal images which enable us to grasp imaginatively who God may be in relation to ourselves and the world in which we live. It cannot be otherwise if we are to speak of God.<sup>27</sup>

The name of God is essentially a revelation of the character of God, a subject that has become a burning issue today. To put it starkly: is the Christian God the same God as Allah? Many Christians and Muslims would categorically answer in the negative. But this response is based on misunderstanding and ignorance, and it is dangerous.<sup>28</sup> According to the Abrahamic traditions, there can only be one God, and while there are undoubtedly different understandings of God within the Abrahamic family, these have more in common than the differences that distinguish them. What is more important than whether the God of Jews, Christians and Muslims is the same God is whether the God who is *actually* acknowledged, worshipped and obeyed is true or false. The God who is used to justify terrorism or crusades is an idol; the God who is merciful, compassionate, just, beautiful, and loving, according to the core convictions of the Abrahamic traditions, that is, the God Christians believe is also disclosed

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25 Armstrong 1993; 2009.

26 See theses 17–18 of 'The Anti-Christ', Nietzsche 1968:128.

27 See McFague 1982.

28 Volf 2011.

in Jesus, is the true God. But can we ‘prove’ the existence of such a God, or is it only a figment of our imagination?

The arguments for and against the existence of God as traditionally understood are much the same today as they have been over the centuries. The argument *against* is that there is no empirical evidence for the existence of God, and all claims to the contrary can be falsified by reasoned argument. God is purely a figment of the imagination. The argument *for* begins, though certainly does not end, with the insistence that while the existence of God cannot be empirically verified, nor can it be disproved, and that generally the God who is disposed of in this way cannot possibly be God. But what does it mean to say ‘God exists’ if God is greater than can be imagined, as the much-debated ontological argument has it? How do we conceive of God if all our images are ultimately inadequate, starting most obviously with that of a big Man (or Woman) in the sky in whom believers can put their trust or whose existence atheists need to disprove? God is greater than our imagination and cannot be found either in the gaps still unplugged in our knowledge or in depictions of reality.

## 7. God of the gaps

Bonhoeffer recognised the futility of trying to find God in the ever-shrinking gaps in human knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Invariably, as science progresses, the gaps in our knowledge shrink and God is banished from yet another sphere where he had previously been the sole answer to our questions. The problem for many people who believe in God is that the more science pushes back these frontiers, the more it seems to be transgressing the province of religion and theology. This explains in part the tension that has sometimes existed between theology, faith and religious institutions on the one hand, and science, reason and the secular academy on the other.<sup>30</sup> That tension remains, despite productive attempts to reduce it, as scientists and theologians seek some common ground on the boundaries that science explores, and the mystery that theologians seek to understand.<sup>31</sup>

Few contemporary Christians are likely to feel threatened by the notion that the earth is not the centre of the universe. But Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution radically challenged the notion of human

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29 See the extended footnotes 5 and 6 in Bonhoeffer *Letters and Papers*, 405–406.

30 See Alister McGrath’s timely reminder in *Why God Won’t Go Away* 2011:81–84.

31 An excellent overview is John Russell & Kirk Wegter–McNelly, ‘Science’ 2004.

exceptionalism and therefore the belief that human beings are created 'in the image of God'. Despite the abundance of 'creationists' among Christians, most theologians today have integrated the proven insights of evolution into their anthropology.<sup>32</sup> Teilhard de Chardin's groundbreaking *The Phenomenon of Man* set this process in motion and his work continues to inspire many, despite its flaws.<sup>33</sup> More recently, Wentzel van Huyssteen has helped us rethink embodied human uniqueness, traditionally understood as 'being in the image of God', within an evolutionary framework.<sup>34</sup> Attributing everything to genetic development is no longer beyond dispute. There is a hierarchy of complexity that embraces the whole of cosmic reality of which human beings are part, and this demands more complex answers than any one discipline can offer.

Theologians should approach this ever-changing world of physics, microbiology and neuroscience with due wonder, humility and care, acknowledging the amazing revolutions that are taking place in our understanding of time and space, of the world in which we live and the universe(s) beyond, and of our own bodies. We can also discern fresh possibilities for retrieving Christian faith, but only if we recognise that the terrain keeps on changing. Building theology on the rapidly shifting sands of scientific discovery is not a good idea, but neither is burying one's head. The jettisoning of inadequate theories along with questionable theologies is part of being led deeper into mystery, for each discovery teaches us 'that reality far outstrips human imagination and guesswork'.<sup>35</sup> There are infinite mysteries in the universe awaiting exploration.

We are at a different historical point in the long debate between theology and science, made inevitable by the increasing awareness of the complexity of an expanding universe and possible parallel universes, and of our own brains. The future of the planet on which we live and of which we are an integral part is by no means certain, nor is the future of our own humanity and its evolving consciousness. Boundaries will be transgressed as science pursues its historic path, but mystery will undoubtedly deepen at the same time. How, then, are we to begin to understand this God who is beyond our definitions, yet relates to us and the world in which we now live in a meaningful and therefore liberating and redemptive way?

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32 Ibid.

33 De Chardin 1959. See also De Chardin 1964.

34 Van Huyssteen 2006.

35 Eagleman 2011:195.

## 8. God beyond modernity

In *Being Human*, I said little about the *mystery* into which we are led as human beings on the journey of faith. I think it was probably because Christian humanism, as it emerged during the Renaissance, was imbued with the same emerging spirit of modernity. Erasmus typified the mood when he poured scorn on the religious superstitions of his day kept alive by the wiles of unscrupulous priests, and applauded, as he himself promoted, scholarship as a means of getting at the truth.<sup>36</sup> This led to suspicion about any recourse to mystery, for religious superstition could too easily be smuggled into the life of church and society under its umbrella. The reality of mystery was not denied, but the notion was prone to religious obfuscation and, as such, problematic for those who promoted a reasoned faith and responsible life in the world.

Modernity is characterised by a growing confidence in the power of reason to solve human problems and to shape the world through scientific endeavour. It challenges mystery but champions clarity, certainty and scientific progress. Theologically, it has found expression in liberal Protestant thought which prided itself on its reasoned, scientific approach to explaining the Christian faith to 'modern man'. But modernity's defining myth of inevitable progress was destroyed on the battle fields of France during the First World War, as was the confidence and credibility of liberal Protestant theology which, in Germany at least, had justified the war in the name of God. Barth, who led the charge, anticipated later postmodern developments in his critique of the power of reason to know God, and largely changed the face of twentieth-century theology in the process. An awareness of the awesome mystery of God, known only to faith, was recovered. This was the theology that attracted Bonhoeffer as a student in Berlin, despite the objections of his teachers who insisted that Barth's 'unscientific theology' would destroy all the gains made in bringing Christianity into the modern era.<sup>37</sup>

Postmodernism is the attempt to understand and critically evaluate modernity within this postmodern framework. It emphasises respect for difference, rejects meta-narratives and hierarchies, challenges patriarchy, anthropocentrism and destructive power relations along with global cultural and economic hegemonies, and is sceptical of dogmatic truth claims. Postmodernist thought helps us question and rethink modernity; it also prompts us to think afresh about how to speak of God beyond the straitjacket of modernity and its scepticism about mystery.<sup>38</sup> In doing so,

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36 See e.g. Erasmus 1971:129–130.

37 Rumscheidt 1972.

38 Ward 1997:xxv.

it helps us to step beyond a pre-modern reading of Christian tradition that is incapable of transformation as it engages new knowledge. But however much postmodernism may break open theological enquiry and offer new possibilities, it is not without its own problems.

Huston Smith sums this up when he writes that whereas

*... the Modern Mind assumed that it knew more than its predecessors because the natural and historical sciences were flooding it with new knowledge about nature and history, the Post-Modern mind argues (paradoxically) that it knows more than others did because it has discovered how little the human mind can know*<sup>39</sup>

Reason has again become aware of its limitations and the fact that there are different rationalities. This brings epistemology, or the theory of knowing, onto centre stage, for how then *can* we know God? It is not simply a theoretical question but one of enormous practical significance. How shall we live in a world that seems to be falling apart, given that the centre (faith in God), which seemed so secure in the past, no longer holds as it once apparently did?

In his prison correspondence, Bonhoeffer noted that the 'fundamental concepts of humanism ... in their finest form' predated the Renaissance.<sup>40</sup> This led him to consider again the importance of the high Middle Ages in providing insight for rethinking Christianity in the 'modern' world. He was not trying to find an escape route by returning to a pre-modern era.<sup>41</sup> His was, rather, an attempt to recover a vision of the world and ourselves that was holistic rather than subject to the Cartesian dualism that underpinned modernity and led to the separation of faith and reason, theology and science, transcendence and immanence. For Bonhoeffer, the clue was found in the mystery of the Incarnation, for in Christ the reality of God and the reality of the world are disclosed at the same time.<sup>42</sup> This was in continuity with his much earlier critique of the idealist epistemologies, which were so formative in his own thinking, but incapable of 'rendering the 'encounter with an other ... whether God, neighbour or enemy'.<sup>43</sup> They were unable to break through the ceiling of rationality, history or experience to the transcendent that held them to account and gave them significance.<sup>44</sup>

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39 Smith 2003: x-xi.

40 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 320.

41 Ibid. 478.

42 Bonhoeffer *Ethics* 1949:47-75.

43 Floyd 2008:119.

44 See Bonhoeffer *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible* 1996.

The need to relate to transcendence is at the heart of the resurgence of spirituality in our postmodern but largely secular age which feels trapped in the iron cage of both instrumental reason and historical fate. The notion that we humans are somehow called to control nature and ‘make history’, either in the name of God or modernity, to justify imperial and similar claims, is rightly seen as idolatrous. But secular neo-humanism continues to understand transcendence in a purely lateral way in terms of our fellow human ‘other’ rather than the ‘Other’ who encounters us as the ‘other’. What fundamentally separates contemporary Christian humanism from such neo-humanism is not its shared commitment to the ‘human project’ and the claims of the environment in which we live, but the basis on which that commitment is made, namely, the transcendent claims that keep it human and challenge the absolutising of the human under whatever banner.

Christian humanism insists that moral responsibility and action in the world is dependent on transcendent critique and empowerment from beyond, but not separate from human agency. In Schweiker’s words, human responsibility and flourishing ‘arise out of and are empowered by gratitude for the infusing of finite life with the *power to do good*, the moral capacity for goodness’.<sup>45</sup> Such gratitude and responsibility are indicators of the divine presence among us. This leads directly to the domain of mystery. For our understanding of God, disclosed in the mystery of the Incarnation as ‘truly human’, does not remove God from the world; on the contrary, it is in the world that God encounters us as ultimate mystery in ‘the other’, in the claims of creation, at the centre and on the boundaries of our existence. That is why our knowledge of God is inseparable from our knowledge both of ourselves and ‘the other’ through whom God encounters us as ‘infinite demand’, or in Tillich’s phrase, ‘ultimate concern’.<sup>46</sup>

## 9. Ultimate mystery and concern

God remains unfathomable mystery even when revealed, for what is revealed is what we need to know about God, not everything there is to know. What we glimpse of God is never enough but always more than sufficient for us. Jesus as the revelation of God is truly God but not the whole of God. Rahner speaks of God as incomprehensible unless God in some way communicates with us.<sup>47</sup> To speak of God as ultimate mystery and therefore our ultimate concern, is making a faith claim.

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45 Schweiker 2010:99.

46 Tillich 1953:14–16.

47 Rahner (note 81) 1002.

Bonhoeffer was adamant that it was foolish to try and ‘decode God’s mystery, pulling it down to the commonplace, miracle-less words of wisdom based on human experience and reason!’ The task of theology, he insisted, is ‘to comprehend, defend, and exalt the mystery of God, precisely as mystery’.<sup>48</sup> When we appeal to God as mystery, we always do so too late to convince those who do not believe.<sup>49</sup> This does not alter the fact that faith ‘knows God as the ultimate and authentic mystery of the world’, or that it ‘understands God as that which is most self-evident’.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the most serious difficulty in speaking of God as ‘ultimate mystery’ is that it sounds remote and impersonal. But the ‘ultimate mystery’ we call God is not an object we study but a Subject, hence the many personal and relational metaphors used to speak about God. What makes it possible for us to respond to God is that as humans we are orientated towards mystery *as persons*. This implies God too is personal, otherwise a relationship whether in contemplation or action would not be meaningful.<sup>51</sup> Faith in God as ultimate mystery, far from being an abstraction, implies a commitment to God as the ultimate concern in living our lives. This leads us deeper into reality, not away from it, into a relationship of trust that expresses itself in love of God and the ‘other’.<sup>52</sup> Faith thus understood is therefore a commitment that has to be made every day within the realities of the world. It is not a certainty that we possess, but a certainty that comes to possess us, the mystery of grace that makes believing possible in the first place.

## 10. The reality of God and the world

As we have seen earlier, in prison, Bonhoeffer began to wrestle with the question of how to speak about religion to its enlightened and disenchanted sceptics. But he did not assume some kind of religious sensibility to which the gospel could appeal; he spoke of Christian faith in terms of living fully and responsibly in the world.<sup>53</sup> His was not the language of piety but of engagement, where the reality of God and the world are united in the crucified and risen Christ. It was there that God encounters us rather than in religious intuition and feeling, however significant they may be. In speaking of God, we should neither assume some religious *a priori* nor try to find God in the gaps of our knowledge not yet plugged by scientific

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48 Bonhoeffer *Meditation on Christmas*, December 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 15, 529.

49 Jüngel 1983:251.

50 *Ibid*, 246.

51 Rahner (note 81) 1003.

52 Critchley 2012:247–250.

53 See Wüstenberg 1998:112–145.



investigation, but rather seek God in what we do know.<sup>54</sup> This applies not only to ‘the relation between God and scientific knowledge’, but also to ‘the universal human questions about death, suffering and guilt’. ‘God’, Bonhoeffer wrote, ‘wants to be recognised in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action, and not only in sin.’<sup>55</sup>

In this way, Bonhoeffer went to the heart of the scientific challenge to faith in God, namely God’s agency in the world – whether or not God could intervene in nature in ways that were traditionally understood as miraculous. Apart from traditional biblical theism which teaches that God is distinct from creation but actively engaged in history, several alternative positions have been adopted over the centuries. Chief among them are pantheism, the view that God can be identified with *all* things; deism, the belief that God, having set all things in motion, is no longer directly involved but lets the laws of nature and history run their course;<sup>56</sup> and panentheism, literally meaning that everything exists *in* God, even though God transcends everything. Panentheism is not unrelated to the Hellenistic view, noted positively by Paul in his sermon in Athens, that ‘we live, move and have our being in God’. But how does this relate to God’s agency in relation to human tragedy and suffering?

There are reasonable responses to the problem that carry explanatory weight. One is that God has given us freedom to make choices but that we do not always make good ones, and that these often result in suffering and even death, not just of ourselves but also of others. Natural disasters are likewise explainable by reference to the nature of the earth and the solar system of which it is part. But even so, the problem of faith in God in the midst of human suffering remains, tempting us along with Job, to ‘curse God and die’.<sup>57</sup> If God is God then surely somehow, somewhere, amidst such tragic events, God must be present, even if hidden. Perhaps, as John Hick said, there is no ‘solution’ this side of eternity,<sup>58</sup> for the problem ‘remains unjust and inexplicable, haphazard and cruelly excessive’, or at the very least, a mystery ‘impenetrable to the rationalizing human mind’.<sup>59</sup> Even so, it may well be, as Hick suggests, that its irrationality and lack of ethical meaning ‘contribute to the character of the world as a place in which true human goodness can occur’.<sup>60</sup> However much genuine

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54 Letter to Eberhard Bethge, May 29, 1944, *Letters and Papers*: 405–406.

55 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 406.

56 *Ibid.* 475–478.

57 Job 2:9.

58 Hick (note 84) 398.

59 *Ibid.* 371.

60 *Ibid.* 371–372.

pleasure enriches life, it is in suffering that we are led into the depths of God's mystery, and through pain that new life is born. Any attempt to justify God's permitting of human suffering must surely begin with the suffering of Jesus on the cross as the revelation of the mystery of who God is. Our deepest knowledge comes, as the Psalmist discerned, 'out of the depths' of human experience.<sup>61</sup>

Keith Ward helps us go further when he writes about God having 'a universe-long intention to bring conscious beings into a community of freely chosen loving relationships' which shapes the laws of nature and the complex possibilities that emerge within it. So, in general 'God will exert the maximum influence for good compatible with the preservation of the relative autonomy of nature and its probabilistic laws, and with the freedom of finite agents'.<sup>62</sup> In short, God 'is continuously, pre-eminently, but not all-powerfully, active in evolution, influencing events through persuasive love but not controlling them unilaterally'.<sup>63</sup> This may not be of much comfort to those who are suffering right now and are crying out for some answers to their plight from an apparently silent and hidden God, but it does relate well to what Bonhoeffer wrote for his secular co-conspirators shortly before he was arrested and imprisoned:

*I believe that God can and will let good come out of everything, even the greatest evil. For that to happen, God needs human beings who let everything work out for the best. I believe that in every moment of distress God will give us as much strength to resist as we need. But it is not given to us in advance, lest we rely on ourselves and not on God alone. In such faith all fear of the future should be overcome.<sup>64</sup>*

It is not a question of whether God is omnipotent, but about the nature of God's power and how it is exercised. In the Creed, God's 'almightiness' is always placed in relation to God's parenting, which provides an analogical clue to the conundrum, for good parents know that their authority is contingent upon their love, not the reverse. Even so, with reference to God, as Tutu says: 'It is one of the abiding mysteries that there can be the oxymoron of a weak omnipotence.'<sup>65</sup> It is a strange power that we discern as we are led into the ultimate mystery we name 'God'.

Much contemporary theological discussion around these issues takes its cue from Bonhoeffer's growing conviction that we have to live

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61 The opening words of Psalm 130.

62 Ward 2001:80.

63 Russell & Wegter-McNelly (note 104) 524.

64 Bonhoeffer (note 89).

65 Tutu 2012: xiii.

in the world *as if* God were not present. But this does not mean that God is not present. The issue is really about the mode of God's presence as the God whose mystery is revealed in the crucified Jesus as self-giving love, not unbridled power that overrides human freedom and responsibility. We continually stand before God, Bonhoeffer says, but before a God who 'would have us know that we must live as those who manage their lives without God'.

*Christ does not help us by virtue of his omnipotence, but rather by virtue of his weakness and suffering! ... Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as Deus ex machina. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help.*<sup>66</sup>

To speak of God's impotence and pathos in this way is shocking to our normal sensibilities of divinity. But no more so than when Paul claims that Christ crucified is the power of God at work in human life and the world.<sup>67</sup> Such language rudely breaks open the door into the ultimate mystery we name 'God'; it also radically challenges the human will-to-power which inevitably leads to violence, including the violence of the cross through which the mystery of God's power and wisdom is revealed as unfathomable love.

#### 11. The mystery that embraces us

The unending quest of science and the theological sense of being led into mystery are analogous and converge, but they are not the same. When Einstein says that the 'most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious', and that this is 'the source of all true art and all science', he is referring to that ultimate mystery which transcends art, science and theological enquiry itself. People of faith name that ultimate mystery 'God', and we use our theological and aesthetic imagination and the resources of tradition to construct images that give substance to what we mean. Being led into mystery is, however, more than a never-ending intellectual search – it is being drawn into the embrace of a love and beauty that is both disclosed yet always exceeding what we can fathom. Only this ultimate reality is worthy of the name 'God', and therefore of our worship, that which makes us 'pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe'.<sup>68</sup>

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66 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 479.

67 I Corinthians 1:23–25.

68 Einstein (note 88).

In Christian tradition, the doctrine of the Trinity is central to the mystery of faith in God; the most complex of all images constructed of God as ultimate mystery. But it is a doctrine burdened by language that is incomprehensible to most people, if not metaphysical gobbledygook easily derided. But the main point of the doctrine is not to try to decipher God, but to describe, in so far as words allow, the 'pattern of God's self-expression' in Jesus Christ and the Spirit, derived from the gospel narrative.<sup>69</sup> As such, it asserts both God's transcendent freedom *from the* world and God's immanent freedom *for its* well-being. Or, as Bonhoeffer declared, the 'doctrine of the Holy Trinity is nothing but humankind's feeble way of praising the mighty, impetuous love of God in which God glorifies himself and embraces the world in love'.<sup>70</sup>

God's beauty is nothing less, then, than God's creative and redemptive, self-giving or kenotic love, which is described in the New Testament as *agapé*, which is another way of speaking of God as triune. All other terms used to describe God, such as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, transcendent and imminent, freedom and power, are qualified and determined by God as *agapé*. Such love is not sentimental but 'holy' because it is qualitatively different from, even if related to, other forms of love, whether erotic, filial or genuine self-love. It is not a love we can manipulate for our own ends, but the love which seeks the good of the other without denying the other freedom to spurn or accept it. It is also a love that seeks justice, especially for the oppressed, and at the same time judges those who perpetrate evil. This is the 'righteousness of God' revealed in Christ, but it is the righteousness of restorative, not retributive, justice.<sup>71</sup>

In the end, the only analogy that comes close to the sense of being led into the mystery of God's unfathomable love and beauty is that of falling in love. Genuinely falling in love is a long-term commitment, an ongoing and ever-deepening exploration of the mystery that binds lovers together in communion with each other and in embracing others. It is a relationship in which initial hesitation, even reluctance, and later apathy, even unfaithfulness, are transformed by the grace of forgiveness and the joy of companionship.

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69 Lacugna 1991:225.

70 Bonhoeffer *London* 363.

71 See De Gruchy *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* 2002:44–78.



# The Trinity, Timelessness and Temporality

Anné Verhoef

## 1. Introduction

Since the debate between Heraclites and Parmenides in early Greek philosophy, the relationship between time and eternity has been one of the most problematic issues in philosophy as well as in theology for a long time, and currently it is being raised as a focal point for debate on the understanding of the nature of God's eternity and its relation to time.<sup>1</sup> The Dutch theologian Berkhof once said that 'the relationship of eternity to time constitutes one of the most difficult problems in philosophy and theology' (Berkhof 1988:60). In this article I will analyse this problem within the context of recent developments in theology and philosophy. The interdisciplinary nature of the problem of time makes it imperative to also take into account the developments in the understanding of time in the natural sciences. This is perhaps too ambitious a task for this article and therefore I will limit my focus to only some aspects within the debate.

Timelessness is an age-old attribute given to God in philosophical and theological traditions. This concept of God reigned unchallenged from Aristotle and Augustine to Aquinas, and Duns Scotus was perhaps the first to break ranks on God's timelessness. Many philosophers and theologians followed and within the last century's development of Trinitarian theology new emphasis has been put on God's temporality. According to the theologian Robert W. Jenson, for example, the Trinity is indispensable to a Christian concept of God and divine temporality is essential to the meaning of the Trinity. Jenson speaks of the Trinity's time as 'temporal infinity' – a term which demonstrates God's self-liberation

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1 The theologian Eunsoo Kim's book *Time, Eternity, and the Trinity* (2010) gives a good overview of the history of this problem as well as the latest developments. It also gives a good indication of all the recent publications in philosophy and theology about time and eternity and of the relevance of this debate. Kim (2010:2) says for example that: 'One of the red-hot issues in contemporary Christian theology is the problem of the renewed understanding of God's eternity and its relation to time'.

from temporal contingencies without extracting him from history. This description of God's time is for Jenson more biblical than the Greek concept of timelessness. A theologian who agrees with Jenson that God is not timeless, but on the basis of a whole different argument, is Antje Jackelén. She developed a 'theology of time' in which time is understood as relational and dynamic. This understanding of time led her to a perspective on the relation between God and time/eternity very similar to Jenson's perspective.

The question to Jenson and Jackelén, and the one which I will pursue in this article, is whether their concepts of the Trinity's time as 'temporal infinity' and time as relational/dynamic, are logically and philosophically tenable. Are their concepts coherent and how do these concepts deal with the critique (from philosophical and theological perspectives) on God's temporality and the implications thereof? The problems of the relationship between 'Timelessness, Trinity and Temporality' as it is mainly described by Jenson and Jackelén, will thus be investigated in this article. An analysis of Jenson's understanding of God's time as 'temporal infinity' will be made. I will argue that Jenson is in some agreement with Antje Jackelén's understanding of time within a Trinitarian model in which the emphasis on eschatology allows reflection upon time as multi-temporality or a complexity of times. Jackelén prefers this 'relationality and multiplicity' of time in physics instead of the understanding of time in Newtonian or static terms. She describes her theology of time as *dynamic* and *relational* and finds in the model of the Trinity space for this dynamism (as the open life of the three persons between them) and relationality (as the relationships between the three persons in the Trinity) of her understanding of eternity and time. Jenson's and Jackelén's argument against God's timelessness will be scrutinized in terms of the traditional philosophical view of God's timelessness.<sup>2</sup> Classical theisms as well as Paul Helm's arguments for God's timelessness will be discussed in contrast to Jenson's and Jackelén's view. I will also put their views in the context of how new developments in the metaphysics of time relate to God's nature, particularly recent developments of the A-theory (the dynamic model) and the B-theory (the static model). It seems that different theological and philosophical understandings of how God relates to time afford legitimate criteria for differing metaphysical decisions about the nature of temporality. Jenson's understanding of God's time as 'temporal infinity' might be compatible with some of these metaphysical decisions. Jackelén's theology of time

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2 It will become clear that Jenson and Jackelén do not argue for a complete temporal understanding of God, but rather against a timeless understanding of God's eternity.



also makes some clear metaphysical decisions and the implications of both these theologians' proposals might thus be controversial within orthodox theology.

## 2. God's eternity as 'temporal infinity' – Robert W. Jenson

Robert Jenson is well known as a significant and prolific writer on Trinitarian theology and eschatology. Jenson is an American Lutheran theologian who has written extensively and very creatively about the Trinity, time and eternity, for more than forty years.<sup>3</sup> Some of his main works as a Trinitarian theologian include his dogmatic works: *Systematic Theology* (1997, 1999),<sup>4</sup> *God after God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth* (1969), and *Alpha and Omega* (1963, 1969). He also wrote the more comprehensive *Triune Identity: God according to the Gospel* (1982), *Christian Dogmatics* (1984),<sup>5</sup> *Unbaptized God: The basic flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (1992)<sup>6</sup> and the short and popular *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel about Jesus* (1973). Of these books, his *Systematic Theology* should be singled out as his magnum opus in which he systematically synthesised his creative Trinitarian theology that has developed over many years. In *Systematic Theology* he builds his whole theology on his insights into the relationship between God and time.<sup>7</sup> Jenson is thus an important theologian to take note of in this article,

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3 Although Jenson is sometimes described as an American theologian, he is well known and respected internationally as a theologian. In the book *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson* (edited by Gunton, 2000), theologians from all over the world and from many different denominations contributed essays of appreciation and dialogue with Jenson's theology.

4 *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God* (1997) and *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: The Works of God* (1999). Hereafter referred to as *ST1* and *ST2*. The theologian Carl Braaten says these books are undoubtedly the crowning fulfilment of Jenson's career.

5 *Christian Dogmatics* (1984) was written with his colleague Carl Braaten. Jenson wrote the chapters on the Trinity, the Holy Spirit and the Sacraments.

6 In *Unbaptized God* (1992) Jenson argues that Christian theology took over a Hellenistic divinity without 'baptizing' it. By that he means that God's impassibility and timelessness (as part of the Greek metaphysics) was not overcome in Christian theology and that it is exactly this problem that leads to a great extent to later ecumenical dividedness.

7 For a discussion about the link between Jenson's narrative theology and his understanding of time/eternity, see Verhoef's article: 'How is Robert Jenson telling the story?' (2008).

especially because he connects the Trinity with temporality, a somewhat controversial conceptual move in both theology and philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

Jenson's theology is to a great extent a reaction to the Hellenistic influences on the early church's theology, especially in regard to concepts like the timelessness and impassibility of God.<sup>9</sup> The very definition of God's eternity as 'timeless' is something Jenson regard as unbiblical and incompatible with the story of creation and redemption.<sup>10</sup> God is not timeless, but God is 'identified by specific temporal actions and is known within certain temporal communities by personal names and identifying descriptions thereby provided' (ST1:44). God is not timeless, but lively, active, an event. Jenson follows Gregory of Nyssa's thoughts and says 'God ... refers to the mutual *action* of the identities' divine 'energies', to the perichoretic *life*' (ST1:214) and '*This being of God is not a something, however rarefied or immaterial, but a going-on, a sequentially palpable event, like a kiss or a train wreck*' (ST1:214). This 'temporality' of God is described by Jenson as God's 'temporal infinity'. Jenson prefer to use the term 'infinity' (limitlessness) instead of 'timelessness' about God, because God is not infinite in the sense that he 'extends indefinitely, but because no temporal activity can keep up with the activity that he is' (ST1:216). God is infinite not by having no boundaries, but by overcoming the boundaries. Therefore Jenson says God's being should be described as *temporal infinity*.

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8 The philosopher Richard Rice explains why Jenson is an important theologian in the discussion about eternity and time: 'The question therefore arises as to how one might conceive of divine temporality without a temporal world for God to experience. The resurgence of Trinitarian thought in recent decades provides a possible resource for dealing with this issue. The work of Robert W. Jenson, in particular, is notable for the way it connects Trinity and temporality' (Rice 2007:328).

9 Jason Curtis (2005:23) explains that: 'According to Jenson, the Greeks, in an effort toward security of existence over against time's fleetingness, defined eternity in terms of timelessness. Since humanity cannot embrace our past, present, and future giving us the coherence of life that we naturally desire, the ancient Greeks projected that ability onto God and therefore defined deity in terms of persistence or immutability. Jenson asserts that while the early church did not simply assimilate Hellenism into its theology, it nonetheless failed to rid itself of certain debilitating features, the pinnacle of which is the notion of divine timelessness.'

10 Pannenberg (2000:49) says: 'Jenson is surely right in contending that the God of the Bible is identified by temporal events, and indeed by a history of such events. He boldly integrates this insight with his Trinitarian theology by conceiving of the biblical narrative as "the final truth of God's own reality" in the mutual relations of God the Father, His incarnate Son, and the eschatological accomplishment of their communion by the Spirit'.

For Jenson this term demonstrates God's self-liberation from temporal contingencies, without extracting him from history.

Jenson says that the 'biblical God's eternity is his *temporal infinity*' (ST1:217) and this description of God is for Jenson more biblical than the Greek concept of timelessness. It is a description of God that implies that 'while one might believe that divine temporality necessarily leads one to a god in process or one lacking sovereign lordship ... it is precisely this 'overcoming' of boundaries that demonstrates God is Lord' (Curtis, 2005:27). God is God because he overcomes all boundaries.<sup>11</sup> He is therefore identifiable by his temporal acts of creation and redemption, but also infinite in the sense that he is not bound by temporality. The implication of this understanding of God is that he is not impassable or immutable, not immune to suffering and change, but a god who is alive and active and involved in the world and its history. God is present, loving, encompassing in our time and place – a timely and timeful God.<sup>12</sup>

According to Jenson, this temporal infinity or 'timefullness' of God is not just something ascribed to God, but it is part of the being of God, it is central to the relationships within the Trinity – it defines God. For Jenson there is a clear connection between the poles of time and the mutual triune roles of Father, Son, and Spirit. According to him the 'Father is the "whence" of God's life; the Spirit is the "whither" of God's life; and ... the Son is that life's specious present' (ST1:218–219). So for Jenson, God possesses a past, present, and future in himself, not only as pure duration (as Karl Barth understood it, with no conflict but only peace between source, movement and goal), but as a *temporal infinity*.<sup>13</sup> Jenson says God 'is *temporally* infinite because "source" and "goal" are present

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11 Jenson explains: 'Any eternity is some transcendence of temporal limits, but the biblical God's eternity is not the simple contradiction of time. What he transcends is not the having of beginnings and goals and reconciliations, but any personal limitation in having them... The true God is not eternal because he lacks time, but because he takes time' (ST1:217).

12 These terms as a consequence of God being 'temporally infinite' are discussed in more detail by Ted Peters in his article 'God happens: The timeliness of the triune God' (1998).

13 Jenson agrees with the pure duration of Barth in the sense that 'nothing in God recedes into the past or approaches from the future' but he differs from Barth when he adds: 'But the difference is also absolute: the arrow of God's eternity, like the arrow of casual time, does not reverse itself. Whence and whither in God are not like right or left or up and down on a map, but are like before and after in a narrative' (ST1:218).

and asymmetrical in him, because he is primally future to himself and only thereupon past and present for himself' (ST1:217).<sup>14</sup>

So to be God is not only to be infinite (by overcoming boundaries) but *temporally* infinite and for Jenson that means that time is functioning as a real past, present and future in God himself, and that it is only in the Spirit, the future, that God is able to be freed from the past and present, to be freed from 'the timelessness of mere form or mere consciousness' (ST1:217). To be God is thus to be always open to a future and to always open a future.<sup>15</sup> But Jenson is careful not to let the whence (Father) and whither (Spirit) fall apart in God's life and says this does not happen, God's duration is without loss, because 'origin and goal, whence and whither, are indomitably reconciled in the action and suffering of the Son' (ST1:219). So it is in the Son, the specious present, that the Father and Spirit (source and goal) finds their unity and are reconciled. With this structure of time within the Trinity Jenson is trying to avoid timelessness on the one hand and to maintain *perichoresis* on the other hand.

The climax of Jenson's theology is that the end will be *theosis*. Jenson says: 'God and only God is the creature's future. God the Spirit is God's own future and so draws to and into the triune converse those for whom the Trinity makes room' (ST2:26).<sup>16</sup> We can thus say that the unity of Jenson's theology lies in the fact that the Trinity is temporally defined, in relation to the claim that God is in fact the mutual life and action of the three persons, Father, Son and Spirit, as they move toward the future. This relationship between God and time is central to Jenson's Trinitarian thought, but the relationship between time and space – and consequently our space in God – needs to be clarified if we want to understand what Jenson means by a Trinity that 'makes room' for us.

As we have seen, for Jenson time is no longer what separates God and world, but time is what they have in common. But while time is something 'outside' us, Jenson says that time is inside the divine subjective centre. Jenson follows Augustine's description that time is 'the "distention"'

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14 Jenson's eschatological focus is clear here – a theme that is also central in Jackelén's theology of time.

15 Jenson says that to be God is to 'always creatively open[s] to what he will be; not in that he hangs on, but in that he gives and receives; not that he perfectly persists, but in that he perfectly anticipates' (ST1:217).

16 Pannenberg says that it is at this point where Jenson's systematic unity of his theology is found: 'unity is provided by the trinitarian perspective: from the beginning, the creation was intended for "inclusion" in the triune community by virtue of union with Christ, the purpose being a "perfected human community". That is the promise of the gospel which is anticipated in the life of the Church and is finally achieved in the final advent of the Kingdom' (2000:49).

of a personal reality ... That is: the “stretching out” that makes time is an extension not of finite consciousness but of an infinite enveloping consciousness’ (ST2:34). So it is in this ‘enveloping consciousness’ of God that time is internal. So it is not outside God, but inside Him, asymmetrical in his *perichoresis* that time exists.

Furthermore, for Jenson it is ‘exactly the divine internality of time that is the possibility of creaturehood at all’ (Cumin, 2007:173). And here we find the strong relationship of time and space when Jenson says: ‘for God to create is for him to *make accommodation* in his triune life for other persons and things than the three whose mutual life he is. In himself, he *opens room*, and that act is the event of creation... We call this accommodation in the triune life “time” ... creation is above all God’s taking time for us’ (ST2:25). So for Jenson created time is accommodation in God’s eternity for others than God and therefore we can speak about ‘God’s *roominess*’ (ST2:25). The implication of this is that *everything* seems to exist in God and that there is no other way possible for things to exist.

Of course this viewpoint of Jenson is not without critique from theologians and philosophers.<sup>17</sup> One problem is that, in Jenson’s words: ‘Those on the one side of the argument accuse those on the other of so identifying God with history among us as to make him dependent on us. Those of the latter party accuse those of the former of continuing so to construe eternity by categories alien to the biblical account of God – for example, by timelessness’ (2006:33). Of course the different sides have different implications, and Jenson admits that he is among those accused of confusing God and creation. Jenson’s defence is, however, that this is an age-old clash that ‘has recurred throughout theological history, between Alexandria – my side – and Antioch, East and West, Lutheran and Reformed’ (Jenson, 2006:33) and it must be added that Jenson at least tries to develop a new understanding of God’s relationship to time – the success of which judgement must be reserved at this stage, because the ‘theology of time’ of Antje Jackelén will help to put Jenson’s theology within a broader context.

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17 Richard Rice is in general very positive about Jenson’s attempt to make a persuasive case that the Trinity involves temporality, but he also has critique: ‘Jenson’s insights are obscured, however, by problematic references to time as a sphere to which God is related’ (Rice, 2007:321). In my view this need not be a problem and the ‘obscurity’ is rather a complexity which creates various possibilities.

### 3. A theology of time – Antje Jackelén

The theologian Antje Jackelén, Bishop of Lund, Sweden, is in general very much in agreement with Jenson regarding the relationship between God and time. In her book, *Time and Eternity, The Question of Time in Church, Science, and Theology* ([2002] 2005)<sup>18</sup> she gives a thorough and carefully presented theology of time and, by its very essence, an incomplete and open thought model because time will always be, according to her, *dynamic* and *relational*. In contrast to Jenson, Jackelén does not present a whole systematic theology based on her understanding of God's relationship to time, but develops instead a 'theology of time' as part of an interdisciplinary dialogue between natural science, philosophy and religion. She starts with an investigation of time and eternity in Christian hymn-books and links her findings then to a discussion of time in the Bible and theology. She also investigates the notion of time in the structure of scientific theories, and finally develops her *relational* and *dynamic* theology of time within the context of the natural sciences.<sup>19</sup> What makes Jackelén's work so promising is the fact that her work is very interdisciplinary (much more than Jenson) and therefore her understanding of time and eternity has a broader appeal to philosophy and natural science. Jackelén's theology of time can thus help to give more philosophical and scientific grounds for proposals of the relationship of God and time than we find in, for example, Jenson's theology.<sup>20</sup>

Jackelén follows Ricoeur's understanding of time as something that must be narrated<sup>21</sup> and that cannot be confined within a simple, unambiguous concept.<sup>22</sup> She says that 'because time cannot be abstracted,

18 This book is a revised version of her doctoral thesis accepted by Lund University, originally published in German and Swedish and later in English.

19 Jackelén (2005:226) specifies that it is 'without thereby making theology dependent upon scientific theories or "exploiting" physical theories theologically, [it is] a hermeneutics that rests on the self-evidence of the discussion and the desire for contact [that] leads here to an enhanced understanding'.

20 Space doesn't allow us to examine Jackelén's whole theology of time or the development of it, and only her main findings and proposals will be discussed here to seek similarities with Jenson's proposals.

21 According to Ricoeur (1988:241), 'each attempt to analyze time directly only multiplies the problems that occur anyway. For this reason, there is no conception of time without narrated time.'

22 Strauss came more or less to the same conclusion in his article, 'Do we really comprehend time?' (2010), when he says: 'What is indeed *baffling* about *ontic time* is that it exceeds every possible concept of time we can obtain and therefore ultimately it can only be approximated in a *concept-transcending idea*' (2010:175) [his italics].

but occurs instead as lived time, it cannot be captured theologically in a fixed system. It can be talked about only under the auspices of dynamism and relationality' (Jackelén 2005:226). Jackelén prefers this relational and dynamic understanding of time, supported (according to her) by scientific theories like relativistic and quantum physics, thermodynamics and chaos theory, instead of the chronological linear concept of time of Newton which leads too easily to a deterministic view of God.<sup>23</sup> The question, however, is what does Jackelén mean with the nature of time as being *relational and dynamic*?

With a relational understanding of time Jackelén tries to avoid her own criticism of understanding time as one single generally valid concept. She admits that one can view time as a convention or a construction, but 'one can come close to it only as lived time and narrated time. From the anthropological perspective, time is "life-time" and, just so, the medium of relationships: relationships to living things and nonliving things, to one's self, and to God' (Jackelén, 2005:227). So time is life with all its connections. To have time is to be related and therefore death is *the* crisis of relation, since in death relationship is lost. Jackelén develops therefore a Christian understanding of death in which the notion of God's faithfulness and constancy in building consistent relations with humankind, even in the case of death, is central. This leads Jackelén to reflect on eternity as the *other* of time – an insight developed in relation to Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>24</sup> Important for her is that Levinas (1987:32) does not describe time as a degradation of eternity, but as the relationship to that which would not allow itself to be assimilated by experience. For Jackelén there is thus a dynamic relationality between time and eternity, and she rejects models that contrast dualistically the temporal world to an eternal God and models that merge eternity and time. She says that 'time is more than a deficient eternity, and eternity is something other than multiplied time' (Jackelén, 2005:116).

In order to find the best understanding of the relationship between time and eternity, Jackelén examined three differentiating models, namely

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23 Hubert Meisinger summarises Jackelén's view on this point clearly: 'Time – and this is her final conclusion – is no abstraction but is "lived time", dynamic and relational. Time is time of life with all its connections. Thus there cannot exist a closed, for all time existing theology of time but only a thought model that leaves room for openness. God is not deterministic but has long ago left the house of Newton – or has never been in it...' (Meisinger, 2009:987).

24 It is, however, important for Jackelén that God's eternity cannot simply be the negative Other of time. That will make God timeless and will not result in a positive relation between God and time (temporal world).



a quantitative model, an ontological model and an eschatological model. She chooses then the eschatological model, firstly because of its power to overcome the dualism of time and eternity; secondly it implies the possibility of speaking reasonably about the temporal openness of God (that would contribute – very importantly for her – to the comprehensibility of the ‘already’ and the ‘not-yet’); and thirdly it corresponds according to Jackelén (2005:226) ‘in a most promising way to the scientific theories that speak of dynamic development and complexity’. This choice of an eschatological model makes Jackelén’s relational understanding of the nature of time very dynamic. Relational and dynamic time belong together for her, because a static and one-dimensional understanding of time is just not possible (at least not any more, although she admits that Newtonian mechanics functions often perfectly in the realm of our everyday life). In *Time and Eternity* Jackelén discussed time in Newtonian, relativistic and quantum physics, thermodynamics, and chaos theory and concludes then with a relational and multiplicity of time in physics which has supplanted the strong principle of causality, and which is open toward the future – a much more dynamic understanding of time than the Newtonian. Meisinger (2009:983) mentions in this regard that ‘the notion of chance also plays an important role because its scientific understanding can build up a creative tension to a theology in which there is a primacy of potentiality over against actuality/reality’. An open understanding of time marked by the ‘already’ and the ‘not-yet’ is therefore indispensable in Jackelén’s theological reflection about time.

As mentioned before Jackelén chooses the eschatological model for the relationship between time and eternity. This eschatologically qualified relationality of time has consequences for understanding the future, namely that the ‘future becomes comprehensible as a relational structure consisting of future and advent’ (Jackelén, 2005:230).<sup>25</sup> Eschatology is therefore for Jackelén primarily the expression for the relationality of old and new, of future and advent, of identity and alterity. A relational dynamic understanding of time understands the future thus as open, and it assumes the temporal openness of God which is qualified eschatologically. Jackelén

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25 The advent is the ‘truly new’ or that which comes (*adventus*) and the future is an extrapolation of the past and present (*futurum*) of which we can only talk from the perspective of our present and which correlates to scientific progress. Meisinger shows in his article, ‘The Rhythm of God’s eternal music: on Antje Jackelén’s *Time and Eternity*’ (2009), that Jackelén is probably in agreement with the German mathematician that the reduction of time on a straight line is functional in classic mechanics, but does not adequately represent the reality of time. Meisinger adds that Muller’s matrix of time can be helpful for Jackelén’s description of ‘advent’ and ‘future’.

says we can speak of the 'constitution of our time through God's selection from divine time and also of eternity as the internal ground that enables temporal life' (2005:229). Jackelén thus moves away from the static-dualistic way of thinking of separating the temporal world and the eternal God; of understanding time as the antithesis of eternity, and instead considers an increase in complexity that occurs 'in, with, and under' nonlinear interactions. In this way time can be acknowledged as lived time and life time. This of course has implications for the understanding of God's relationship to time/eternity. First of all God cannot be described as timeless, because He is in relation to time, He is 'temporally open' and relates to everything always anew (eschatological). It is according to Jackelén precisely God's eternity that grounds and enables our temporal life and therefore God has a very positive relationship with the temporal world.

This strong relational and dynamic understanding of time of Jackelén has the implication for theology to get rid of an absolute, static, theistic notion of God, in order to gain a dynamic and relational notion of God that gets along more easily with modern scientific insights in physics. A Trinitarian model fits here very well into the thinking of Jackelén, because it notes the complexity of God and has better possibilities for the relation of God, time and eternity than a one-dimensional understanding of God. Jackelén says that 'the strength of Trinitarian models lies in the possibility of conceiving multi-temporality and relational dynamics between time and eternity' (2005:190). It is at this point that there is a strong link between Jackelén's theology of time and Jenson's Trinitarian understanding of God's relationship to time and eternity. Both agree that God should not be viewed as merely timeless, and that the timeless and temporal eternities of God are no longer mutually exclusive. Jackelén says the two belong together 'because God, based on the concrete event of God's temporal self-revelation, is seen in Trinitarian differentiation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and, correspondingly, God's relationship to time should also be viewed in a Trinitarian manner ...' (Jackelén 2005:99). They thus both agree that in the complexity of who God is, timelessness and temporality will be in a relation. They do however disagree on precisely how this is the case, with Jenson describing God's time/eternity as 'temporal infinity' and linking the different temporal times with the different persons in the Trinity, and Jackelén preferring the term 'multi-temporality' and seeking in the Trinity a unity of timelessness and multi-temporality. She follows the theologian Dalferth's suggestion that the differences are expressed as the timeless eternity of God the Creator, the multi-temporality eternity of the Spirit, and the temporality of the Son. In contrast Jenson links the past to the Father, the future to the Spirit and the specious present to the

Son. With no anticipated compromise between the two, it is no surprise that one of the biggest problems Jackelén has with the Trinitarian model is the 'arbitrary' assigning of aspects of the Trinity to various aspects of time/eternity.<sup>26</sup>

Without going into too much detail in the differences between Jenson and Jackelén, it is important to notice the attempt of both to revise (or rather to dismiss) the understanding of God as timeless, but at the same time not to understand God as completely temporal. In their effort Jenson maintains less the difference between God and creation and may be guilty (as many of his criticisms suggest) of mixing time and eternity by eternalising time and temporalising eternity.<sup>27</sup> Jackelén, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on the eschatological difference between old and new and says that the ontological difference between eternity and time should be interpreted from that basis and not vice versa.<sup>28</sup> Within the Trinitarian model she is able to differentiate eternity and time, and still allows eternity to encompass the entire course of history. For Jackelén (and Jenson) eternity is thus not just opposed to time, but positively related to it, embracing it in its totality.<sup>29</sup> Here she agrees with Wolfhart Pannenberg, who says: 'the true Infinite ... is not just opposed to the finite but also embraces the antithesis' (Pannenberg 1991:408). At this point we need to ask if Jenson's and Jackelén's understanding of God and time/eternity is philosophically tenable. Are their understanding of time and their Trinitarian link with temporality and eternity logically coherent and do they sufficiently deal with critique that is normally given to this viewpoint? In answering these questions it is necessary to understand something of the broader philosophical debate about time and eternity. Before I focus on that I want to discuss an opposite viewpoint to those of Jenson and Jackelén, namely the understanding of God as timeless. This

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26 Jackelén (2005:109) says: 'The question still remains whether the assigning of aspects of the Trinity to various aspects of time/eternity can occur only more or less arbitrarily or whether tenable criteria for such an assignment can be formulated.'

27 Jenson (1995:40) says for example: 'Time ... is the accommodation God makes in his living and moving eternity, for others than himself.'

28 Jackelén follows the theologian Dalferth's formulation here: 'God is related to creation, in triune fashion, as a differentiated unity of Father, Spirit, and Son: as the timeless foundation of everything, as the multi-temporal companion of everyone, and as the temporal mediator of salvation in the specific life-time of Jesus Christ and of all who believe in him. God's eternity is the epitome of these time relationships and cannot be identified with any one of them as such' (Jackelén 2005:100).

29 This is, of course, reconcilable with Jenson's notion of *theosis*.

I will do by discussing the reasons why classical theism understood God as timeless.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. God's timelessness in 'classical theism'

In classical theism, God has been conceived as a timeless Being, who exists totally outside of time and has no temporal duration.<sup>31</sup> The reason why classical theists saw God as timeless is because time had been understood in the category of change and movement and these characteristics (change, motion) could not be applied to God as the most perfect Being, because change would imply improvement or decay.<sup>32</sup> In Anselm's view for example, if God exists in time, then He must be temporally composite, be temporally contained, and subject to temporal change, but the simple God cannot be so. Since God is supremely simple and immutable and eternity is nothing but His essence, it is timeless. Therefore God is timelessly eternal in the sense that He exists absolutely outside of time. Kim concludes thus that 'the concept of absolute timeless eternity is basically constituted according to the Greek ontological paradigm: the Perfect Being – simplicity – immutability – timeless eternity' (Kim 2010:100).

God's timelessness is further derived in classical theism from the concepts of divine omnipresence and omniscience. All these doctrines are inseparably interrelated to each other, and they are the irreducible divine attributes in classical theism. It is especially in Thomas Aquinas's theology that we find the logical and ontological basis of God's eternity in God's simplicity and immutability. For Aquinas (as with Anselm),<sup>33</sup>

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30 Classical theism can, according to Kim (2010:61) be 'attributed to the traditional concept of God, which was mainly formulated in the period from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas'. . Katherine Rogers (2007:5) says that 'classical theism has come to mean the view that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent ... simple and immutable'.

31 Nash (1983:21) describes this kind of timelessness of the classical theism as follows: 'It means that God exists totally outside of time; that is, God has neither temporal duration nor temporal location. God does not exist at any particular moment of time and His existence does not occur during any period of time. He is 'outside' of time. For a timeless God, all time exists in one eternal present; there is no past or future for God.'

32 For a historical background to the conception of God's timeless eternity in classical theism (traced through the Neo-Platonists, Plato and up to Parmenides, and also through Augustine, Boethius, Anselm and Aquinas), see Kim's *Time, Eternity and the Trinity* (2010:61–102). I will follow much of Kim's description in my discussion here.

33 There is an interesting difference between Aquinas and Anselm. According to Feinberg's analysis, 'whereas Anselm moves from God's perfection to his eternity in *Proslogium* and from God's simplicity directly to his eternity in the *Monologium*, Aquinas's basic line of

God's simplicity entails His immutability, and His immutability entails His eternity. Therefore, God necessarily exists outside of time and for God all time exists in one eternal now. This view of timeless eternity has been maintained by Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas and recent advocates of this view are Paul Helm and Brian Leftow, among others.<sup>34</sup>

The classical theism's view of God's timeless eternity emphasises the absolute transcendence of God over the temporal world. It does succeed thus to maintain the difference between God and creation, but it does not allow a positive relation between God and time. The problem is that God becomes the other (denial) of time and the question arises how can God positively relate to the temporal world if he is the 'denial' of time? In other words: If the eternal God exists absolutely outside of time, how can God relate to human time? This question led to diverse answers to supporters of the timelessness of God – from the notion of 'supertime' of Anselm, to the notion of 'typical temporal properties' of Brian Leftow.<sup>35</sup> I will not discuss these answers here, because they are not part of the scope of this article, but would rather now put the problem of God's timelessness (or 'temporality' according to Jenson and Jackelén) in the broader philosophical and scientific debate about time and eternity. This will hopefully help us to understand and evaluate Jenson and Jackelén's proposals better.

## 5. Contemporary philosophical and scientific debates on the nature of time

It is impossible to give a full account of the contemporary philosophical and scientific debates on the nature of time within the limits of this article, and therefore I will only focus on the contemporary analytic philosophical understanding of time and on some insights gained in this debate from

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thought moves from simplicity to immutability and from immutability to timeless eternity' (Feinberg, 2001:384).

34 Paul Helm's view will be partly discussed in this article, but for more on Leftow's views see his: 'Time and Eternity' (1991), 'The Eternal Present' (2002) and 'Eternity' (2003).

35 In his essay 'The Eternal Present' (2002), Brian Leftow defends the coherence of the claim that God is not temporal yet is present. He introduces the idea of a typically temporal property (TPP) and argues that 'there is in fact a continuum of possible views of God's relation to time' (Leftow 2002:23) and that even most of those who hold God is eternal think God's life has some TPP's. Leftow's whole argument cannot be explained here, but for a discussion on it, see Manson's *God and Time* (2005).

the natural sciences about the nature of time.<sup>36</sup> In short, the consensus is more or less that time is conceived as ‘change’, and ‘the debate is whether the nature of time is dynamic (tensed) or static (tenseless)’ (Kim, 2010:11). This debate is important (also for this article’s argument), because some of the most powerful arguments against the timeless eternity of God come from the analytic philosophical conception of the nature of time. In the area of philosophical theology, the debate on the nature of time is thus very significant for our understanding of God’s eternity and its relation to time. Kim (2010:10) explains that ‘there are two competitive theories of time, the tenseless (static, B-series) and the tensed (dynamic, A-series) theory of time’. He adds that some philosophers and theologians argue that the traditional conception of God’s timeless eternity is only consistent without any serious problems with the tenseless (static) theory of time (for example Paul Helm), and others argue that the tensed (dynamic) theory of time is correct, and that God is therefore temporal (for example Jackelén). In this debate, time is conceived as ‘change’ – that is to say, they debate whether the nature of time is dynamic (tensed) or static (tenseless). To understand this debate better I will analyse and summarise the main conceptions of the two competitive theories and will briefly discuss some aspects of the nature of time.<sup>37</sup>

The tenseless (static or B-series) theory of time can be summarised as follow (Kim, 2010:112): (1) Time itself is real, but our experience of the flow of time is a mere mind-dependent illusion. Notions of past, present and future are subjective properties and not ontological or objective reality. (2) All times – past, present and future – are essentially and equally real and this leads to determinism for the future. (3) The A-determinants (pastness, presentness and futurity) are not essential to understanding the reality of time, but rather the realities lie in the B-relations of time as earlier than, simultaneous with, and later than. The tenseless (static or B-series) theory of time has been generally supported by a metaphysical rejection of the objective reality of temporal becoming;

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36 Jackelén devotes her Chapter Four ‘Time in the Formulation of Scientific Theory’ (121–181) in her book *Time and Eternity* (2005) to the current scientific debate on the nature of time. In contrast, Jenson does not make any parallel to the scientific understanding of time in his theology. Eunsoo Kim also devotes a chapter (Four, 103–145) in his book, *Time, Eternity and the Trinity* (2010), to the contemporary philosophical and scientific debates about the nature of time. I will follow mainly Kim’s exposition in my argument.

37 There are very diverse concepts and competitive theories and explanations in conceiving the nature of time. See, for example, Strauss’s article ‘Do we really comprehend time?’ (2010). I will however focus here only on the tenseless (static) and the tensed (dynamic) theories of time.

scientific arguments from the deterministic interpretation of Einstein's special theory of relativity; and arguments from the tenseless theory of linguistic-analytic philosophy.

In contrast, the tensed (dynamic or A-series) theory of time has the following essential tenets (Kim 2010:120–121): (1) Time itself is real and the idea of temporal becoming, the flow of time, is not a mere mind-dependent illusion, but an ontologically objective reality of the world. (2) The existence at 'now' is only real (presentism), for the past has ceased to exist and the future does not yet exist. (3) The A-determinants (pastness, presentness and futurity) are essential to understanding the reality of time, for there are ontological differences between the temporal properties. The tensed (dynamic or A-series) theory of time has been supported by the metaphysical understanding of the objective reality of temporal becoming; arguments from the indeterministic interpretation of Einstein's special theory of relativity; arguments from the tensed theory of linguistic-analytic philosophy; and arguments for the 'arrow of time' in thermodynamics, quantum physics, cosmology, biology, and causation theory.

Which theory is correct between the tenseless (static) and the tensed (dynamic) theory of time? The philosopher Michael Tooley (1997:13) points out, it is 'the most fundamental question in the philosophy of time'. Unfortunately there is not yet any consensus between these two rival theories. With Antje Jackelén's theology of time we saw that she has chosen a relational and dynamic understanding of time. This conception of time is a choice for the tensed (dynamic or A-series) theory of time. Jackelén did not, however, make her choice on arbitrary grounds, but argued that her position was the best supported by the scientific theory of time. She says that 'neither Newton nor Einstein could explain time definitively. Quantum physics and chaos theory add greater meaning to the concepts of relation, dynamics and openness...' (Jackelén 2005:181). It is especially this openness of time which is very important for Jackelén and which is so meaningful from a theological perspective. Jackelén's acceptance of a dynamic and relational understanding of the nature of time is also in accordance with philosophers and theologians like Padgett, Yates, and Craig.<sup>38</sup> They, with others (like Eunsoo Kim<sup>39</sup>) hold a relational-dynamic conception of time. Jackelén is also in agreement with Kim that she focuses on objective (real) and relational time and not on subjective and

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38 See Padgett 1992. *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*: 82–121; Yates 1990. *Timelessness of God*: 95; and Craig 1978. *God, Time and Eternity*: 497–503.

39 See Kim's view in his *Time, Eternity and the Trinity* (2010):137.



absolute time.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to absolute time (Newtonian), the conception of the nature of time as relational understands time not as something in itself for it cannot be separated from concrete changes occurring in it. So, according to the relational view of time, time is not identical with change but comes from our awareness of time in the changes of things. Time is thus the ‘form of the relationship between beings (things) and events, and with other beings’ (Kim 2010:139). Jackelén’s understanding of time (influenced by Ricoeur) as something that must be narrated and as something that cannot be abstracted, but occurs instead as lived time, fits in very well with the dynamic and relational view of time described here.<sup>41</sup> The conclusion can thus be made that her (Jackelén, and by implication Jenson’s) understanding of the nature of time can be seen as philosophically logically coherent within the tensed view of time.

As mentioned before, the choice for a tenseless (static) theory of time is consistent with the traditional conception of God’s timeless eternity, while the choice of the tensed (dynamic) theory of time as correct is consistent with God as temporal. The different choices thus have hugely different implications. However, with Jackelén’s and Jenson’s choice of the tensed view, they do not accept God as completely temporal – as Nicholas Wolterstorff for example does – but specified the type of temporality in God.<sup>42</sup> The dangers (or problems) of accepting God as totally temporal are very well stated by those who accept the tenseless view of time and also the timelessness of God. The philosopher Paul Helm is a good contemporary example to take note of here. I will briefly discuss his position in this debate to understand some of the potential weaknesses in Jenson’s and Jackelén’s position.

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40 Kim (2010:137–149) cites Bunge who classifies the four possible consistent theories of time as: AS – time is Absolute and Subjective (Kant), AO – time is Absolute and Objective (Newton), RS – time is Relative and Subjective (Berkeley), RO – time is Relative and Objective (Lucretius). Bunge prefers the relational-objective view of time and insists that time is not out there, by itself and ready-made, as the absolute view of time had it: time is in making alongside happenings.

41 Kim (2010:144) explains that ‘in the tensed theorists’ view, it is an absurd idea that a concrete person (or object) and its history are different. In this sense a tensed theorist, D. Lewis, recently insisted, that the tenseless view of the temporal parts theory of personal identity cannot be reconciled with the moral agent. He says, ‘if the tenseless view is correct, there are no agents which persist while performing any action’.

42 In his well-known article, ‘God Everlasting’ (1975) and more recently in ‘Unqualified Divine Temporality’ (2001) Wolterstorff clearly asserts that the biblical God is not eternal in the timeless sense, but temporal, and therefore *everlasting*.

6. A contemporary understanding of God's timelessness – Paul Helm

The question that should be asked now is: If time is tensed, should we discard the classical conception of God's eternity? In recent theological discussions on the issue there are mainly four possible options concerning the relationship between God's eternity and human time: 'absolute timelessness' (P. Helm), 'everlastingness' (N. Wolterstorff), 'relative timelessness' (A.G. Padgett), and 'accidental temporalism' (W.L. Craig).<sup>43</sup> Although the idea of atemporality of divine eternity has recently been widely criticized and rejected by many theologians and philosophers for many reasons, it is still advocated on the philosophical basis of the tenseless view of time with other theological reasons.<sup>44</sup> Paul Helm is one of the most rigorous advocates in this regard and he states 'God exists 'outside' time' (Helm 2001:29).<sup>45</sup> According to Helm (2001:34) biblical data do not directly support either eternalism or temporalism and God's timeless eternity comes rather from the following three basic theological arguments: (1) the idea of the divine fullness or self-sufficiency (aseity); (2) the Creator-creature distinction; and (3) the conclusion of the cosmological argument for God's existence. These are all considerations that need to be taken into account when one opts for the temporal view of God.

Helm is aware of the critique against the timeless view of God, which asks how God's action of the temporal world can be explained. For example: Does not this temporal act change God's mode of existence to temporal? Helm's answer is that God's creation of the universe is not a temporal event, nor was there a temporal beginning-point for the universe to exist because it is co-eternal with God. Thus, for him, 'God has a timelessly eternal relation with the temporal world, but a relation that is nevertheless contingent' (Helm, 2001:49). Helm explains thus God's action in the world as the temporal effects of his eternal will. Helm says, 'As an analogy

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43 For a discussion of the different possibilities, see Ganssle's *God and Time: Four Views* (2001).

44 Brian Davies summarises several major objections to God's timelessness as follows: '1. If God is timeless He cannot be a person. 2. If God is timeless, his knowledge entails absurd consequences or is restricted. 3. If God is timeless, he cannot act. 4. If God is timeless, he cannot command our admiration or love. 5. There is Biblical precedent for rejecting the view that God is timeless. 6. There is no good reason for supposing that if there is a God, then he is timeless' (Davies 1983:215).

45 Paul Helm is a strong representative of the contemporary view of God's timelessness. He 'and Brian Leftow hold fast to the timelessness of God' (Jackelén 2005:83). See for example Paul Helm's *Eternal God: A study of God without Time* (1988) and 'Divine Timeless Eternity' (2001).

we may think of a person's action in setting the timer on her central heating system. This is (we may suppose) one action, analogous to God's eternal willing. But this one action has numerous temporally scattered effects, analogous to the effects in time of God's eternal act of willing' (Helm, 2001:53). Although Helm does try in this analogy to answer this main critique against the timelessness of God, there are still many other critiques against this position. One is the inner incoherence regarding the problem of 'simultaneity'; another is the implied immutability and impassibility that is implied by divine timeless eternity; and another is that many temporalists assert that a timelessly eternal God cannot be omniscient because he cannot know what time is 'now'. For Eunsoo Kim, one of the 'most implausible thoughts is that, as Helm says, the temporal world itself is co-eternal with the eternal God in tenseless sense. If ... God created the world *ex nihilo*, how then can the world be co-eternal with the Creator?' (2010:158).

Helm's understanding of God as timeless succeeds thus in emphasising the absolute transcendence of God the Creator beyond the world, but Helm lacks in describing a positive and real relationship of God with his creatures and a positive relation of God to time. Of course this is a very brief look at Helm's view, but the implication for my study about Jenson's and Jackelén's understanding of God and time, is that Helm's insistence on the timelessness of God does not necessarily make Jenson's and Jackelén's view invalid or wrong. The opposite is rather true, because it indicates how Jenson's and Jackelén's view of God and eternity is an attempt to overcome the type of critique that is offered against the timeless view of God. We can thus conclude that also in this sense Jenson's and Jackelén's view is philosophically and theologically tenable. However, the critique of the timeless view of God (as presented by Helm) against the temporalists should be raised against Jenson's and Jackelén's view in order to determine how convincing it is. In this regard it can be said that it is more Jenson than Jackelén that will have difficulties in answering the two theological motivations for God's timeless eternity, namely (1) the idea of the divine fullness or self-sufficiency (aseity); and (2) the Creator-creature distinction.<sup>46</sup>

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46 I mentioned before that Jenson is often criticised for failing to maintain the distinction between Creator and creation. Jenson also identifies the second person of the Trinity, the Son Jesus, so completely with the church (as *totus Christus*) – see my article 'Trinity, time and Ecumenism in Robert Jenson's theology' – that the critique of not maintaining God's aseity or self-sufficiency can be lodged against him. Jackelén, on the other hand, tries to maintain this distinction between God and world in her eschatological model.

## 7. Conclusions

The question explored in this article is whether Jenson's and Jackelén's understanding of the relationship between God and time (as 'temporal infinity' and as relational/dynamic) is logically coherent and if it is philosophically and theologically tenable. My answer to this question is yes, but not an unqualified yes. On the positive side of my answer I must emphasise the creative space and possibilities their theologies offer to the understanding of the nature of time, as well as the relation between God and eternity. Especially Trinitarian theology has the ability to accommodate the tension between God and time/eternity in a relational way. It makes sense that Jackelén (2005:109) says: 'Trinitarian models enable us to conceive of multi-temporality and relational dynamics between time and eternity'. Jenson used this possibility to accommodate the different poles of time within the Trinity and to connect them to the different persons in the Trinity.<sup>47</sup> Jackelén's critique is, however, valid: 'The question still remains whether the assigning of aspects of the Trinity to various aspects of time/eternity can occur only more or less arbitrarily ...' (Jackelén 2005:109).<sup>48</sup>

Another positive aspect of Jenson's and Jackelén's proposals is that they shift the understanding of the nature of time as 'change' to 'life'.<sup>49</sup> Jenson allocates this 'life' to the *perichoresis* of the Trinity and Jackelén focuses more on the relational aspect of it. She says about the advantages of relational time that 'it does not tolerate a flattening of time into the simple infinity of a super-continuity or a total synchronicity in which everything is available non-stop. In a relational understanding of time, time is conceived as 'time for,' which always stands in relation to an

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47 In contrast to Jenson's effort, the classical theists tried to avoid locating time in the 'simple' God. Eunsoo Kim says that the problem with classical theism is its one-sided emphasis on the absolute difference between time and eternity because of the unity of God (i.e. *Deo Uno*). He therefore suggests that 'a positive relationship between God's eternity and time, along with the qualitative difference between them, can be fully conceived in Trinitarian thinking (i.e. *Deo Trino*)' (Kim, 2010:102).

48 It must, however, be said that the Trinitarian model does remain a good model to incorporate the tensions. A recent good example is that of Eunsoo Kim who develops a 'Trinitarian analogical understanding of God's eternity and its relation to time ... a kind of *via analogia* through the following Trinitarian triple analogy, *analogia vitae*, *analogia relationis*, and *analogia communicationis*, centred in the ... God given analogy, Jesus Christ ...' (Kim 2010:2).

49 This notion has opened up various theological possibilities and Eunsoo Kim (2010:341), for example, also works with 'a biblical and theological conception of the nature of time as life against the philosophical conception of the nature of time as change'.

Other' (Jackelén 2005:229). This understanding of the nature of time as *life* has thus a much more *open* view on the future and includes a possible relation between God and creation. Jackelén can therefore speak about the future as 'dance with God' and Jenson uses a similar metaphor for the future, namely music – a *fugue*.<sup>50</sup> Both metaphors include time and also a playfulness, an openness. This 'open theology' of both affirms Polkinghorne's understanding that 'different accounts of the nature of time will be consonant with different theological understandings' (Polkinghorne 2006:982). Jenson and Jackelén work thus (in the terms of Polkinghorne)<sup>51</sup> with a 'universe of becoming', instead of a 'block universe'. The question remains however how much Jenson and Jackelén should be regarded as implicated by their views as 'open theists' or 'process theologians'.

Also positive about Jenson's and Jackelén's proposals about God's eternity/time is that they are in agreement that a very static, distant, closed, timeless eternal and transcendent concept of God is not at all consistent with the biblical teaching. Jenson reached this conclusion from arguing from the narrative of God (and from God's Trinity), and Jackelén reached this conclusion from arguing from the narrative of various Christian hymns' description of God. Both emphasise very consistently a personal, dynamic, relational, open, temporally everlasting and immanent concept of God. They both assert that this is a more biblical concept of God and Jackelén also adds that this is a more logical and scientifically consistent concept of God.

A final positive remark about Jenson and Jackelén is that they both, in the development of their theologies, do not first of all adhere to the analytical philosophical theories of time (which essentially conceive of time as change). Jenson does not discuss the philosophical options

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50 Jackelén (2005:174–175) says 'openness to the future based on unpredictability does not therefore essentially cancel the determination by the initial conditions ... The static idea of a cosmology with an infinitely uniform flow of time by no means corresponds to this scenario, which is represented more adequately by the image of a dance ...' and 'a possible story of time ... is the narration of time as dance ... This flexibility and openness is simultaneously also its weakness ...' (Jackelén 2005:230). Jenson's metaphor is that of music. He says that 'the final word about God is that he is beautiful, and that as he is the biblical God, who is Whence and Whither, he is beautiful with the kind of beauty that music has. Indeed, I proposed that he is beautiful with the kind of beauty that a certain *kind* of music has. The last word about God, I said, is that he is a great fugue, of Father, Son, and Spirit. So the last word about us is this: the end is music' (Jenson 2002:41–42).

51 See Polkinghorne's article 'Space, Time, and Causality' (2006).

of tenseless or tensed views on time in his theology, but he works with a Trinitarian concept and develops his whole theology in reaction to the influence of the Greek philosophers' view of God's timelessness. Jackelén also does not develop her theology of time primarily from a philosophical perspective, but from Christian hymns and the nature of time as life.

Although Jenson's and Jackelén's conceptions of the nature of time can thus in my view be largely regarded as philosophically tenable, especially for those who agree on their acceptance of the dynamic understanding of time,<sup>52</sup> both Jenson's and Jackelén's proposals will probably receive a lot of critique from orthodox theology. Some of these critiques have already been mentioned in the separate discussions of Jenson and Jackelén and therefore I will mention only one here, which is probably the most important one. The Patristic Fathers and the Reformers (and Karl Barth) always emphasised the difference between God and his creatures, God and his creation, God and time. They argue that for God to be God (Biblically), this distinction needs to be maintained. The problem is that by understanding God as temporal, God will thus be like his creatures, like his creation, and therefore there exists a strong traditional theological argument that God is timeless in spite of recent developments.<sup>53</sup> This problem opens up two further problems. The first problem is God's relationship to his creation. With a temporalist view God is often understood in pantheistic terms and even Jenson is often accused of 'panentheism' and even 'pan-en-trinitarianism'.<sup>54</sup> This also leads to questions about God's aseity or self-sufficiency. The second problem is

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52 Of course, the debate between the tenseless and tensed views has not yet been concluded. It is also necessary to analyse Jenson's and Jackelén's understandings of God and eternity in terms of the three remaining possible options concerning the relationship between God's eternity and human time, namely: 'everlastingness' (N. Wolterstorff), 'relative timelessness' (A.G. Padgett), and 'accidental temporalism' (W.L. Craig). My findings on their conceptions of time and eternity are thus preliminary and further research on this point may be a fruitful enterprise for the future.

53 Recent development includes, for example, efforts by Karl Barth, who uses the term 'pure duration' to speak of God's time, which means all time (past, present and future) is 'simultaneous' in God. In contrast, 'human time' is for Barth 'successiveness'. Barth tries not to see God as timeless, though, and says: 'His eternity is not merely the negation of time, but an inner readiness to create time, because it is supreme and absolute time, and therefore the source of our time, relative time' (Barth 1960:521). This concept of 'pure duration' is, however, according to Jenson, still too strongly linked to timelessness rather than to temporality.

54 Mark Mattes says for example: 'The logic of Jenson's view of God is led by a conceptual commitment to a "pan-en-trinitarianism" in which all

about God's relationship to the future. The problem is that 'temporalists' such as Jenson and Jackelén can easily be understood as 'open theist' or 'process theologians' who assert, based on their understanding of God and time, that God does not know the future. Although this might not be necessarily a philosophical problem, it does open up a whole new wave of critique within the theology about God's omniscience and God's omnipotence.<sup>55</sup>

Jenson's and Jackelén's proposals about the relationship between God and eternity/time emphasise the complex relation between 'Timelessness, Trinity and Temporality'. This complexity can, however, be viewed in a positive way, because in this complexity lie possibilities for a more creative understanding of God's time than that of classical theism. It seems to me that the direction of relating God and time is from Timelessness to Trinity to Temporality.

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55 histories are called to their fulfilment by the very life of the triune God finding itself in, with, and under these histories' (Mattes 2000:484).  
The philosopher Richard Rice discusses, for example, Jenson's theology as an example of open theism in a very positive light in his article 'Trinity, Temporality, and Open Theism' (2007). See also his positive view of open theism in his article 'Process theism and the open view of God' (2000).





# The Trinity and Time

Klaus Nürnberger

## 1. Introduction

The invitation to contribute to this volume came as a pleasant surprise. Looking through some of Dirkie Smit's essays I was struck by how much we have in common – our Protestant heritage, our rejection of apartheid, our concern about the economy, our awkward societal position as privileged white males and our frustration with the elusive unity of the church in the South African context.

Naturally there are also differences. Dirkie is rooted in and committed to the Reformed tradition; my theological mentor is Martin Luther. Dirkie has a substantial Afrikaans-speaking constituency; I belong to the tiny and insignificant German-speaking minority. He is embedded in international networks; I have always been a loner. Dirkie's demographic location lies in the Western Cape; mine in the former Transvaal (now Gauteng). We also belong to two different generations. All these factors determine one's assumptions and directions. So be it. Differences enrich the body of Christ.

What matters at this juncture is celebration. Birthdays conjure up the spectre of time. So does the South African transition. So does the thrust of modernity. All mental and social processes are accelerating. The traditionbound mindset of Christianity finds it virtually impossible to keep pace with contemporary developments. Faith has remained behind at the airport while the jumbo jet of modernity is roaring into distant skies. Being part of both, believers are torn apart by cognitive dissonance. Unable to endure the tension, they jettison their faith and lose their bearings. Or they ignore science and lose their credibility. Or they live alternately in a Sunday and a weekday reality.

This often-overlooked dimension of a 'contextual' theology prompts me to engage in some reflections on time in relation to the Trinity. Time is an extremely tricky and complex topic in science and philosophy and one can easily burn one's fingers (Greene 2004:127–323). However, my aim is simply to debunk unwarranted speculation in theology. The underlying concern has been expressed and elaborated by countless others (Brummer, 2005 is only one example). Unfortunately, one cannot deal with the

closely related and intriguing issue of the relation between eschatology and entropy in a short essay such as this (Polkinghorne 2006:61ff; Russel 2008:298ff.)

## 2. Philosophical foundations

Speculation, as I use the term, has nothing to do with wild guesses or irresponsible behaviour on the stock exchange. It refers to the practice of making problematic deductions from problematic assumptions. For me, the issue has once again become urgent because of my current engagement with the challenges that the natural sciences are posing to traditional theological assertions. They seem to undermine the credibility of everything else we say as Christians in the modern world.

Working on my response to Richard Dawkins's *God Delusion* (Nürnberger 2010), I felt constrained, along the lines of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, to 'become a scientist to make the gospel accessible to scientists'. My point of departure is the approach of experiential realism (Nürnberger 2011, ch. 5).

Similar approaches are called 'critical realism' (Ian Barbour) and 'model dependent realism' (Hawkins). Experiential realism avoids deductions from reified abstractions and biblical metaphors. Reification means 'making real': an abstract term or a metaphor is given ontological status, assuming that it exists out there.

We have inherited the practice of making deductions from reified abstractions from classical Greek philosophy. It tries to escape a messy historical and material reality into the 'eternal' sphere of perfect ideas and ideals, thus from time into eternity, from space into universality, from matter into spirit, from earthly power plays into celestial harmony, from 'existence' into 'essence'. It operates with abstractions from experienced reality, not with experienced reality itself.

According to a (rather simplistic) reading of Platonism, ideas are real. In fact they are deemed more real than concrete phenomena because the latter are subject to historical flux and spatial limitations. They come and go. Ideas, in contrast, belong to an eternal and unbound spiritual realm. Ideas fell into the slavery of matter, from which they need to be liberated. Authentic reality is spiritual reality: its manifestation in matter is inauthentic by definition.

Deviating from Platonism, Aristotelianism believed that the idea (or rather the 'form') was located within the phenomenon. But this form possesses an inherent thrust (teleology) to overcome its material constraints and imperfections. In this sense, Aristotelianism is still an idealist approach. Mediaeval nominalism argued, in contrast, that ideas

(or *universalia* as they were called at the time) are nothing but names used to group similar phenomena together, thus abstractions from experienced reality (Von Aster 1965:163).

The juxtaposition of Platonism, on the one hand, and nominalism, on the other, has reappeared in various forms throughout Western intellectual history. During the Enlightenment, rationalism stood against empiricism. The idealism of Hegel was debunked by Feuerbach and Marx. The approach of modern science is a (highly qualified) form of empiricism. It collects evidence, formulates theories and tries to verify or falsify these theories through further evidence. Theology, in contrast, continued on the idealist track and worked with reified abstractions and metaphors. This is one of the reasons that science and faith have drifted apart during the last four centuries.

### 3. Classical Christian doctrine

When the Christian message spread from Palestinian Judaism to the Hellenistic world, it responded to the needs and frames of reference of its new environment (Lohse 1974:49). Enculturation is typical of the inherent rationale of biblical faith and its historical dynamic (Nürnberger 2002). However, Hellenistic culture managed to freeze the gospel message into its own static set of assumptions.

God was defined by Platonism as the ultimate idea of the good, the true and the beautiful, the essence of irreducible perfection or, in the words of the 'Protestant Orthodoxy' of the seventeenth century, 'infinite spiritual essence' or 'most perfect essence' (Schmid 1961:112, 117). Note the words 'infinite' (not fleeting, mutable, mortal), 'spiritual' (not part of material reality), 'essence' (the inherent ideal type of reality), 'perfection' (not part of an evolving historical reality).

To arrive at a concept of divine perfection, Protestant Orthodoxy followed an ingenious procedure. It ascribed to God all perfections found in reality and removed all imperfections found in reality. So it defined God as the essence of perfection in contrast to the experience of an imperfect world. Divine perfection, thus construed, was believed to include unity, simplicity, immutability, infinity, immensity, eternity, omnipotence (comprehensive power), omniscience (comprehensive knowledge), omnisapience (comprehensive wisdom), impeccable justice and unadulterated goodness. Ultimate truth, it was assumed, cannot be changed, augmented, or perfected. It is eternally valid, universally applicable in complete harmony within itself.

Though contrasted with a messy world, these attributes of God were not led from experience, from the biblical tradition or from the

proclamation of the gospel, but were posited as logical implications of the abstract concept of divine perfection. Although Protestant Orthodox theologians declared that perfect knowledge of the perfect God can be gleaned only from a perfect revelation, as in the Scriptures, they did not need revelation to draw such inferences from their premise. They just adorned their deductively gained postulates with Bible verses that seemed to fit – gleaned from all over Scripture, regardless of the respective contexts of these verses.

As Ludwig Feuerbach pointed out much later, such ‘attributes of God’ are either unrealistic human desires or abstractions from earthly phenomena, both idealised and projected into a non-existent heaven. It is very hard to refute this. I also do not think that the premise of perfection is typical for the Scriptures. Biblical faith is geared towards transformation rather than perfection. Where the concept is used, it refers to God’s incorruptible justice and sacrificial love, both proclaimed, on the one hand, as pastoral reassurances in dire situations and, on the other, as challenges to emulate God’s redemptive intentionality (Ps. 19:8, Mt. 5:48),

#### 4. Speculations concerning time and eternity

In the Bible it is assumed that all power at work in the universe is the power of God. Here, ‘omnipotence’ is an experiential, not a speculative, concept. In Protestant Orthodoxy, by contrast, God’s omnipotence implies that the entire length of historical time must have been ‘created’ by God. God is not subject to time. So history must have existed from eternity in its complete form. God’s omniscience implies that all stages of this history must be known simultaneously by God (Isham & Polkinghorne 1996:143ff.). God’s immutability implies that this pre-established sequence of time must be fixed forever.

If that were the case, the future would not be open; there would be no unrealised potential, no option, no choice, no decision, no point in having goals, visions or ethical precepts. The human being would be deprived of freedom, and thereby relieved of responsibility, doomed to end up in glory or perdition. More ominously, God himself would have lost control. Though theoretically omnipotent and bound by no regularity or causality whatsoever, God would nevertheless be eternally fettered by his own decree. He would not be able to move, act or respond.

This kind of inflexibility can at best be said about the validity of regularities and causal sequences that guide the behaviour of energy in all cosmic processes. However, these regularities and sequences seem to evolve (or at least manifest themselves) simultaneously with evolving reality. Moreover, they always open up a range of yet unrealised options

and potentials. If that were not the case, it would be futile to ask God for guidance, to ask God for redress in times of need, or to try to make decisions in line with the will of God.

The assumption of divine timelessness underpins the idea of predestination: by eternal decree one is doomed to end up either in heaven or in hell. There is hardly anything that could fly more directly into the face of the biblical concept of God – the God of creative power and redemptive love – than the doctrine of predestination. Luther advised believers to shun such dark mysteries and stick to the clarity of the gospel. When he radicalised the idea in his controversy with Erasmus on the freedom of the will, the point was that we depend on God's grace for our salvation. Calvin was more assertive of its validity and significance as part of biblical revelation. However, it was his successor Beza who developed it into its classic form.

But what was the intention? Assuming that the Bible contained the revelation of divine truth, the Reformers wanted to do justice to biblical texts that seemed to demand the postulate of divine predestination. However, there is a difference between pastoral reassurances found in the Bible that an all-powerful and caring God is in charge of a desperate situation, on the one hand, and the abstract postulate of God's omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience, on the other. These assertions about God are rational deductions from ostensibly axiomatic assumptions inherited from Greek metaphysics. It is significant that the Hebrew language does not even possess a word for 'eternity'. *Ad olam* means 'for all ages to come'. Even the root of the Greek word for eternity (*aion*) originally referred to the entire stretch of the 'age' and not to timelessness.

The biblical God is the God of history – from the most primeval past to the most remote future. We humans are situated in time and space and God meets us where we are. Whatever we can know of this God is not geared toward a timeless eternity. Being the Creator of reality, God may indeed transcend all constraints into space, time and power, but God's dealings with reality happen within the earthly framework of time, space and power relations.

Nor do the Scriptures claim that the future is forever fixed, regardless of what humans do – although some texts, which are meant to warn or reassure, can be tuned in to such speculations. What they do say is that God responds to humans who mess up their lives and that these responses can be harsh or gracious, yet are always meant to be redemptive. It is the transformation of what is ought to be that true spirituality is concerned about and that theology should try to clarify.

## 5. Hard realities

Speculations about what God may be 'in Godself' do not bring us closer to God. It would be better for us to visualise God the way God actually operates in experienced reality. To have time means to have a beginning, duration and an end. To have time means to make decisions, that is, to throw switches that alter the direction of causal sequences, that impact the future evolution of reality, that have beneficial or detrimental consequences. To have time also means to 'move on a single rail'. A single rail cannot accommodate alternative or simultaneous sequences of events. Whatever moves on this rail – whether fruitful or worthless – devours that particular stretch of time forever after.

The only 'thing' which we know of that it is fixed forever is the past. But the past no longer exists. As the current outcome of the past, the present is also only because the past cannot be undone. The past has brought me to the location where I am situated at present – in front of my computer in Pretoria- however strong my desire to be elsewhere. I cannot simultaneously be in Djakarta and Oslo. However, as the future unfolds, I can move from here in all kinds of directions.

Similarly, I cannot go through another stretch of historical time. that is, to live either in the past or in the future. I also cannot turn the wheel of history back to the celebration of my sixtieth birthday. The future is indeed open, but only within the parameters set by the past. Expressed in scientific jargon, this happens only 'on the edge of chaos', or in situations of extreme 'sensitivity to initial conditions' (Nürnberg 2011: ch. 6).

These are hard facts that faith has to accept. Genuine faith does not have to speculate. Speculations do not create realities. Nowhere do the biblical Scriptures claim, for instance, that God ever went back into the past to repair what had gone wrong there. What can happen and what indeed does happen is that God picks us up in whatever situation and condition we find ourselves at any point in time, whether through the actions of others or our own. and leads us into a more wholesome future.

To make peace with God means to make peace with one's own temporality and the temporality of everything that exists and happens. But to make peace with God also means to accept his suffering acceptance of the unacceptable and participate in his creative and redemptive activity rather than lead a self-centred, obstructive and destructive life. That is what faith is all about.

## 6. Time-fullness?

Attempts to describe 'eternity' as 'time-fullness' (God has equal access to past, present and future) or speculations about an 'eternal time'



(whatever that could mean) only worsen the dilemma. Just look at the kind of argument in Polkinghorne (2006) through the eyes of a scientist! Such metaphors and speculations have no referent in the world we know. If God – and thus the risen Christ – is unfettered by time and space, as faith assumes, this can only mean for us that God is present at all times and all places in the respective now and here.

This statement is a pastoral reassurance of God's accessibility for us: it does not authorise us to draw ontological inferences. The speculative idea that God has simultaneous and equal access to past, present and future does not follow. The fact that such a 'time-fullness' resembles the 'block-universe' in physics does not help either because this is a mathematical construct, rather than experienced reality or established fact (Polkinghorne 2006:977).

Eternity cannot mean timelessness, or time-fullness, or endless time, or cyclical time, or 'eternal time', because in its original meaning eternity is an abstraction from the experienced flux of time. The concept of eternity may be used as shorthand for radical transcendence. But then we should refrain from making ontological statements about it, because transcendence marks the boundary of accessibility for human observation, interpretation and manipulation.

What could 'eternal life' mean? Being mortal, humans cannot possess a never-ending life on the strength of their own disposition. They can only participate in the 'life of God'. Eternal life is authentic life. Authenticity can be defined only in relation to participation in God's creative authority, God's redeeming love and God's comprehensive vision, thus in God's creative and redemptive project in this world. This is a process, not a condition or a possession.

## 7. Speculation based on reified metaphors

Does the 'evidence' for faith assumptions not lie in biblical revelation? Classical theologians read the Bible through the spectacles of Hellenistic ontology (Lohse 1974:45–76). They found metaphors for God such as 'God the Father', the 'Son of God', the 'Spirit of God', and reified them. They never bothered to establish how such concepts emerged and evolved in history in response to particular needs and frames of reference. They did not trace the trajectory of their intended meaning through biblical history. They did not heed the metaphorical nature of all God-talk, and its basis in cultural history.

In the Bible these concepts refer to the God who created and maintained the universe; to the God who promised progeny and land to Abraham; the God who liberated Israel from Egyptian slavery and gave

them the land; the God of the Sinaitic Covenant and the Mosaic Law; the God who sent the prophets to greet and comfort his people; the God who adopted the king as the 'son of God', meaning his representative on earth (Nürnberg 2002: ch. 9). In the New Testament, God is the Father of Jesus Christ, deemed the Messianic King, and the Spirit as God's creative and redemptive presence among his people.

In short, this is the God who manifested God's creative and redemptive presence in a sequence of messages and events in the history of Israel. Faith is persuaded that the same God whose creative power propels the processes of reality acted redemptively in Christ and is spiritually present as Creator and Redeemer within the community of believers. There is nothing uncanny about God being in command of creative power, having redemptive intentions and being spiritually present among his people.

However, classical theologians were inspired by the Hellenistic frame of reference: to cater for this God of timeless, universal and harmonious perfection and absolutise the metaphors of Father, Son and Spirit. They tried to establish, through plain deduction, the relation among the three concepts themselves and their relation to the concept of divine unity and simplicity. In doing so, they entangled themselves in logical knots that kept them busy for centuries and defied resolution up to the present day. Looking at the procedure, it could not have been otherwise (O'Collins 1975:64).

Protestant Orthodox theologians were not so obtuse as to overlook the logical impasses. But they were at pains not to tamper with the frame of reference in which established doctrine had been formulated. Having declared the Bible the sole source of divine truth (in opposition to the Catholic assumption of the validity of both the biblical and the ecclesial traditions), they claimed that the doctrine was a divine mystery, revealed in the Holy Scriptures, which humans simply had to accept, worship and glorify.

Why God should have clouded God's self-revelation in an impenetrable mystery, rather than making it as clear as day to whoever wanted to enter into fellowship with God is difficult to understand. Except for the 'stumbling block' that God, the Source and Destiny of reality as a whole, should manifest God's creative and redemptive intentionality not in a glorious show of force but in a failed human being (1 Cor. 1:22–24), who was born in a stable and who died on a cross, there is no mystery in the biblical original. The 'mystery' was created by theologians using a particular approach based on a particular set of assumptions.

Why was that not seen? One could not mess with orthodoxy. After all, any deviations had been pre-defined as heresies that automatically

excluded one from the community of believers. Over the centuries endless ingenuity was invested in attempts to untie the knots – from Hegelian dialectics to the psychology of self-consciousness, to an inner-trinitarian community as a prototype for an earthly community. Very few of these attempts reflected the original intention as found in the Bible. Even when perusing the current debate (for example, in Volf and Welker (2006)), one cannot suppress the impression that academic theologians know more about the internal workings of the Godhead than can be known.

## 8. The cost of speculation

It takes theologians years of study to understand how the original statements, whether produced by a millennium of biblical history or by two further millennia of ecclesial history, came about and with what intention they were first formulated. For the laity, even the educated laity, they represent an impenetrable conceptual jungle.

Ordinary believers may simply ignore them. Some may worship the ‘mystery’. Some may try to make some sense of them. But any Bible study or theological discussion on the topic reveals perplexity and uncertainty. If that is the case for people within the fold, what about those who look at Christian theology from outside the fold? Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses mock Christians about the fact that they have never discovered that  $1+1+1 = 3$ . What about natural scientists whose field demands conceptual precision and mathematical stringency?

Experiential realists can be forgiven if they believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond redemption. For Dawkins, the Trinity is a superb example of the ‘characteristically obscurantist flavour of theology which – unlike science and most other branches of human scholarship – has not moved on in eighteen centuries’. Moreover,

*the religious assert minute details for which they neither have, nor could have, any evidence. Perhaps it is the very fact that there is no such evidence to support theological opinions, either way, that fosters the characteristically draconian hostility towards those of slightly different opinion ... (Dawkins 2006:33ff),*

We have to take this critique seriously. Biblical metaphorical language emerged and evolved in response to changing situations of need and frames of reference. With regard to the grounding of biblical statements, one has to understand their embeddedness in experienced reality and changing world views rather than reify the metaphors by means of which they were first expressed and build speculative edifices on them.

## 9. The Trinity in terms of experiential realism

The 'Trinitarian history of God' has become a popular motive in recent times. History is a dynamic concept. But does it refer to real, historical time, or to imagined, constructed time? Granted, the biblical sources do not allow for historical precision. But an experiential realist will at least strive for historically plausible conjectures.

In terms of actual history, the Trinity contains no insoluble logical tangles. Jesus was a Galilean rabbi who interpreted, proclaimed and enacted the God of Israel as a God of redeeming love and mercy. Because of the liberating content of his message and the perceived divine authority with which he proclaimed and enacted this message, his followers took him to be the messianic king expected by Judaism.

The messianic king was believed to be the 'Son of God', that is, God's representative and plenipotentiary on earth (Psalm 2). Therefore traditional messianic titles (Son of God, Son of David, Son of Man, Image of God, the Anointed, the Shepherd) were applied to Jesus. The four Gospels are unanimous in stating that Jesus referred to himself as the 'Son of Man' – a messianic title taken from Daniel 7. In this text, the 'Son of Man' is a human being authorised and sent by God to replace the monsters who had ruled before him.

After a seemingly impressive ministry in Galilee, Jesus entered Jerusalem for the Passover in a jubilant, unarmed procession surrounded by Galilean pilgrims. The style of this entry was reminiscent of the behaviour of the 'Prince of Peace' envisaged in Isaiah 9 and 11. The cleansing of the temple was a messianic act expected by Judaism. His claim to messianic authority and his message prompted a hostile reaction from the Jewish establishment. Soon a formidable formation of enemies tried to get rid of him.

His message of divine grace contradicted the Pharisaic understanding of God's retributive justice (Deut. 28, 30). His rejection of the temple cult undermined the status and income of the priesthood. The Sanhedrin (a kind of Jewish parliament answerable to the Roman overlords) was enraged by his claim to divine authority. The citizens of Jerusalem could not contemplate a messiah hailing from the despised province of Galilee (Mt. 21:10). His messianic pretensions made him suspect to the Roman authorities.

Seemingly, he also did not mince his words in his condemnation of the Jewish leaders. However that may be, in a rare show of solidarity, these normally antagonistic social formations clubbed together to get rid of him, He was condemned to death by the Sanhedrin and executed by the

Romans as a rebel. His mission had ended: everybody could see that his claim was fraudulent and his proclamation heretical.

Or so it seemed. After a time of trauma and intimidation, his followers were empowered by visionary experiences to proclaim the crucified Jesus as the 'risen Christ', the designated messianic ruler of the universe. Soon he was seen as the manifestation of God's creative power and redeeming love, the instrument of the Creator's original intentions and ultimate designs, the judge of the last judgement, the first and the last.

The idea of resurrection as such was not foreign to Judaism. The scandal lay in the message that God had identified with his claim to messianic authority and his interpretation of the God of Israel – and that, in spite of his helpless death on the cross. In fact, believers claimed, this catastrophe was the prime manifestation of God's redemptive and sacrificial concern for fallen humanity.

This was an outrageous claim. The hostility against it could only be expected. The intended meaning of the proclamation was, however, that the redeeming love of God, proclaimed and enacted by the earthly Jesus, was lifted out of the constraints of its earthly manifestation and declared valid and accessible to all people in all situations at all times by Godself. The new human being had become the new humanity. Everybody could now participate in the new life of Christ through the power of God's Spirit. This new and overwhelming certainty was expressed in terms of the Jewish messianic and apocalyptic traditions and soon made its way into the wider world.

So much for an historically plausible conjecture based on the witness of the New Testament. There are no paradoxes and mysteries in this reconstruction.

What really made the gospel mysterious, implausible and scandalous at the time was not a logical tangle, but the proclamation of God's suffering and transforming acceptance of the unacceptable. The creative power and the redeeming love of God did not manifest themselves in earthly glory, but in the shameful, helpless and hopeless death on the cross of his messianic representative (I Cor. 1:18–25).

In sum, the Trinity formulates the three constitutive aspects of faith in Christ: (a) God, the Source and Destiny of reality as a whole; (b) manifests God's creative and redemptive intentionality in the person, message, ministry and death of Jesus of Nazareth; and (c) the creative power and the redemptive love of God as proclaimed and enacted by Jesus of Nazareth are now present and effective as God's own Spirit permeating, liberating and transforming the community of believers.

## 10. Conclusion

As a method in theology, experiential realism will try to reconstruct the historical situations and frames of reference in which biblical faith emerged and evolved, the changing responses of God's creative and redemptive intentions to changing human depravities, needs and predicaments, and the basic thrust of this 'Word of God' in biblical history.

It will then do for its time what the biblical authors did for theirs. It will proclaim the creative and redemptive intentionality of God, the transcendent Source and Destiny of reality, in response to current human failures, deprivations, and quandaries. This is an arduous task, but a task that can lead to plausible interpretations of biblical faith and avoid the frustrating obscurantism that the deductive method has produced throughout the history of Christian theology.

## Trinity, History – and Discernment?<sup>1</sup>

Dirk J Smit

### 1. Recognizing the finger of God in history?

In March 1979 a conference at UNISA focused on ‘The Meaning of History’.<sup>2</sup> Although these were not as such times of transition, they were deeply troubled times of struggle and conflict. The interpretation of history was also a site of struggle – and believers and theologians were all part of these very real struggles. A group of right-wing activists from the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging led by Eugene Terreblanche entered the Senate Hall in full battle dress, and attacked, tarred and feathered the respected historian F.A. van Jaarsveld on stage, in front of the shocked scholarly audience, before his lecture on diverse interpretations of the event at Blood River in 1838. This became the earliest incident for which an amnesty application before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was

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- 1 This paper was read during a consultation on the theme ‘Theology in times of transition. Creating a Continuous Inclusive Conversation, A Celebration of the work of Coenie Burger,’ at the Hofmeyr Centre, Church Street, Stellenbosch, 23–25 January 2012. Most of the contributions and discussions during the consultation dealt with the theme of ‘discernment’ and the invitation was that this plenary paper should consider possible implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for practical forms of discernment and for so-called missional ecclesiology today. The form of the oral presentation was left unchanged, and only the references were added for purposes of publication. The personal style and content, honouring Coenie Burger, has therefore also been retained.
- 2 For the collection of papers delivered during the Conference, but without any account on the eventful day, see A. König & H. Keane (eds.), *The Meaning of History* (1980). The literature dedicated to this theme is of course limitless, both in scholarly, literary and popular discourses. Therefore only two studies are mentioned, both because they call attention to the complexity of these questions, in the same way that the present essay attempts to do. The first is the very old but influential and still informative collection of classic perspectives on the theme, edited by the well-known Karl Löwith, *Meaning in history* (1970), with essays working backwards from Burckhardt and Marx to Augustine, Orosius and the Biblical view of history. The second is the late work by the eminent ethicist, mainly from Chicago, James Gustafson, *An examined faith. The grace of self-doubt* (2004).



received. On 10 May 1999 Eugene Terreblanche defended their conduct by arguing that it was motivated by their religious convictions, their interpretation of the acts in history of 'our God, the Holy Trinity, and the God of Blood River, who brought, who gave us the victory at Blood River'. In detail, he described the events at Blood River, interpreting all these details in the light of the conviction that 'it was God, it was not a myth'. Asking for amnesty, he refused any apology:

*I cannot for the sake of this court and simply lip service, say I am sorry because my Master, Jesus from Nazareth, and the Trinity of God was defended by me, because my nation was defended by me.*<sup>3</sup>

In a significant keynote address during the same meeting, the systematic theologian J.J.F. (Jaap) Durand reflected on 'God in History – an Unresolved Problem', later published also in Afrikaans, as 'Die Vinger van God in die Geskiedenis – 'n Onopgeloste Probleem', to which (then Bishop) Desmond Tutu responded, with approval and enthusiasm.<sup>4</sup> Jaap Durand has been the one theologian in South Africa – as I have argued elsewhere<sup>5</sup> – who took the problem of history more seriously than most, in many ways and in several studies, including his ground-breaking doctoral work on Aquinas in *Heilsgeskiedenis en die dialektiek van syn en denke* (1973).<sup>6</sup>

Durand explained that theological thought since the 20th century can be characterised by the rediscovery of the concept of history in God's revelatory acts. Theologians from different traditions again understood that the God of Israel was in the truest sense the God of history. This includes an awareness that history is open towards the future, and that being part of this history means expecting the unexpected and risking the new. In biblical language, this openness to the future is emphasised by the conviction that God as the Lord of history is a living God who acts freely and who, although God, remains true to Godself and to God's promises, and never becomes slave to a kind of blueprint of history. On the contrary, God's actions are free, new, creative and unexpected. God's actions in history are contingent in that they resist formalization and programming.

These convictions, he continued, are not limited to any so-called salvation-history, separate from the everyday experience of so-called

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3 For the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the amnesty application, see the *Report*, Volume 6, Section 3, Chapter 6, 461–563.

4 Durand 1980:171–178, with the response of D. Tutu on 178–181. Also Durand 1986:91–99.

5 Smit 2009.

6 Durand 1973.

universal history, but belong integrally to the biblical view of history. The conviction that history, some way or other through, in partnership with or even in spite of human beings, is written by the finger of God is a premise of faith that follows inevitably for those who accept God's revelation as recorded in the Bible, he argued. However, as he pointed out,

*this premise creates more problems than it solves with regard to the interpretation of history. Indeed, history is a story written by the finger of God, but do we have the text? Things are ambiguous or inscrutable. Do we have any assurance that the things we consider to be momentous coincide with those which would be found momentous if God showed us the whole text and commented on it? (Durand 1980:73)*

Already in the Bible itself, this is also the case, he argued. Ambiguity and inscrutability are of course true also of God's history as told in the Bible. So-called bare facts do not have any revelatory character, not even in the Bible. They always have to be interpreted. Although it is God's history, it is at the same time also human history – and one of rebellion and failures.

All such interpretations are, however, also ambiguous, and therefore controversial. Even in cases where God's rule in itself was not questioned, the interpretation of God's presence – already in the Bible itself – was indeed questioned, 'the *interpretation* of these events, the presumptuous conclusion that in these events the will of God and God's intention could be *discerned*' (his italics).

*To confess that history is a story written by the finger of God is one thing; to identify, interpret and attach a specific divine meaning to specific parts of that story is quite another matter (1980:174).*

The thrust of Durand's argument then becomes a warning against the widespread and influential tendency in the history of the church to develop some kind of fixed pattern in terms of which faith and theology think that it does indeed become possible to interpret history as God's story and to attach divine meaning to specific parts of that story. This temptation, according to him, is prevalent in many different ways and forms in history and today – in theological movements, figures, systems. However, our trust in our own patterns contradicts our own confession of the living God, acting freely in history.

*If we believe in the presence of the living God in history, a God who acts freely and creatively, history can never be a closed circle with a fixed pattern. What we do as a result is to create our own pattern, perhaps not*

*always a total pattern, but at least a pattern comprehensive enough to accommodate the fragments that need interpretation (1980:174).*

The eternal *ordo ad Deum* (of Aquinas) appears on the level of the temporal – and we can recognise and name this divine presence, we can interpret and discern the divine meaning of history, behind the flux and changes, the transformations and transitions of everything contingent and surprising.

Indeed, in recent years, he concluded, a new approach to the problem of God in history seemed to appear in theology. In this new approach, the ideas of contingency and an open future do not seem to be in conflict with God's presence in history. The problem is resolved by no longer speaking about God as One who rules the world in transcendent majesty according to a fixed and preconceived plan. God is now rather seen as One who, with human beings as partners, makes history and in a certain sense is part of this historical process. This is an ambiguous development, according to Durand. On the one hand, it reflects something of the biblical message of a living God. On the other hand, there is the acute danger that God could be dissolved in an historical process.

What is certain, for him, is that such a new (and more biblical) approach makes the task of discernment of God's finger in history even more difficult.

*This makes the interpretation of historical events from a theological point of view very difficult. Of course there is a pattern and plan, but not in the sense of a blueprint that we can somehow discover, because God is God's own plan. This fact makes the interpretation of history a hazardous undertaking because we mortal people lack the necessary data. It can also be a dangerous undertaking (1980:177).<sup>7</sup>*

## 2. Discerning?

One of the theologians who struggled like few others with this difficult and dangerous challenge to discern the presence of God in history was the North American Richard Niebuhr.<sup>8</sup> For him, theology precedes ethics. Before asking what we must do, we should ask what is happening, what

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7 All the references from Durand 1980.

8 For Richard Niebuhr and for the following brief discussion, see more Smit: 'Theology and the transformation of culture – Niebuhr revisited (2007). In addition to his major books mentioned there, for eighteen unpublished essays by Niebuhr that were published posthumously, see the collection edited by W.S. Johnson, *H. Richard Niebuhr. Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (1996).

God is doing. Only then, understanding what is going on and what God is doing, can we ask how we should respond.

But how can we know what God is doing? He answered this question in his classic *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), a radical attempt to keep Barth and Troeltsch together in a way that would have a lasting impact on different theological streams, including narrative theology, faith formation studies and responsibility ethics.<sup>9</sup>

In a chapter on ‘The point of view’ he emphasised both our historical relativism (we are conditioned by our socio-historical situation) and our religious relativism (we can speak and think about God only from the point of view of faith in God). Christian theology has no other option but to be ‘confessional’, that is, to start ‘by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view’, or also in his own words ‘by recalling the story of Christian life and by analyzing what Christians see from their limited point of view in history and in faith’ (Niebuhr 1941:5–31).

This led to his well-known discussion of ‘The story of our life’ (1941:32–66), in which he made the important distinction between ‘history as seen’ and ‘history as lived’ (or ‘external’ and ‘internal’ history). The church has no other way of stating its faith than by telling its own story. He argued that ‘the great source of evil in life is the absolutizing of the relative.’ Christianity faces the continuous temptation of *idolatry*, of ‘taking something relative for the living God’. Normally, this means that Christian faith and the church are seen as instrumental, as necessary for serving other purposes, whether religious, cultural, ethical or political. In his famous study on *Christ and culture* he would later discuss this tendency under the rubric of the ‘Christ and culture’-position.<sup>10</sup> For the Christian community, argued Niebuhr, the challenge is to find the unity of their life-story in the revelation of the personal, living, one God in the Christ-event. They should be willing

*to regard all events ... as workings of the God who reveals himself and so to trace with piety and disinterestedness, so far as its own fate is concerned, the ways of God in the lives of men. It is necessary for the Christian community, living in faith, to look upon all the events of time and to try to find in them the workings of one mind and will (1941:63).*

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9 For the following argument and most of the references, see Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941).

10 Niebuhr 1951.

These thoughts were powerfully expressed in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, where he contrasted henotheism and polytheism with radical monotheism.<sup>11</sup> It is from these sinful, divisive, and destructive interpretations of society and culture that the revelation of the One God can liberate us.

The crucial question, therefore, becomes how to use this view of revelation in interpreting history, concrete, present-day events, theologically? He explained this by using Pascal's well-known dictum, when he discussed 'reasons of the heart' and emphasised the role of imagination (1941:67–100). Understanding by means of revelation is in opposition to 'the evil imaginations of the heart', to our idolatrous interpretations, and not in opposition to reason as such (1941:79–80). We must use our imagination, seeking patterns for interpretation, and then make reasonable, rational observations and conclusions.

Apart from revelation, he argued, we have other patterns which we employ in understanding our joys and sorrows, but for the most part they are not only inadequate, leaving us ignorant, but evil, tending to lead to destruction. There is, however, 'an image neither evil nor inadequate which enables the heart to understand and the event through which that image is given them Christians call their revelation' (1941:80).

What is this image of revelation, making discernment possible? Interestingly, suffering played a major role in his own answer. In our interpretation of history, our understanding-through-revelation of what is happening, suffering plays the key role in our interpretation of the past, the present and the future. Without going into any detail here, his conviction was that such discernment will lead to conversion – conversion of our memories, conversions of our actions in the present (since we do not understand what we are doing to others), and conversion of our fears and dreams.

By now, it should also be clear why 'responsibility' became the term that he preferred to describe the proper moral conduct of Christians.<sup>12</sup> They must respond to the living God, revealing Godself in history according to the pattern of Jesus Christ, or according to his famous motto, 'God is acting in all actions upon you, so respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action' (1963:126). Especially in later years, he often used the distinction between human beings as answerers, makers and citizens. He wanted to contribute a theory of moral responsibility, using the root metaphor of 'human-beings-as-answerers'. For him, moral action was

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11 Ibid. 1960.

12 Ibid. 1963.

more a situational response to challenges than pursuing ideals or adhering to laws (1963).

Therefore, for him, Christianity was ‘permanent revolution’ or *metanoia*. Through the years he used many synonymous expressions: change of mind, repentance, conversion, redemption, republication, reinterpretation, revolution, reconstruction, restoration, reorganization, metamorphosis, transformation, transvaluation, transfiguration. This was also the conviction behind the well-known fifth type in *Christ and culture* as well as the reason why he consistently called this position ‘conversionism’.

‘Transformation’ does not refer in the first place to something active on the part of Christians, but instead to a response on their side, a response of radical, revolutionary conversion, a response to what the living God is doing. That is why it is called ‘concrete *conversion*’. At the same time, it is important that this ‘revolutionary faith’ or ‘conversion’ means responding to what God is doing in particular situations, in very concrete, and ever-changing, socio-historical situations. That is why it is called ‘concrete (or contextual) conversion’.

This conversion, the proper transformation of self, church and society, does not take place in terms of timeless, abstract and never-changing principles, ideas or slogans, but in terms of the concrete and very particular historical contexts and what the sovereign God, known in Jesus Christ, is doing there and then. This makes a theological analysis of the situation a prerequisite for moral response. For all these reasons, he was very much aware of the context, both of time and place, in which he practised theology. His first book was the epoch-making *The social sources of denominationalism* (1929), a sociological analysis of American churches.<sup>13</sup> With that approach, he introduced a new approach to situational theology, with the help of social analysis, which was to have major effect in American theology in the 20th century.

Not satisfied with a sociological interpretation, however, *The kingdom of God in America* (1937) followed as sequel, to complement the sociological interpretation with a theological one,<sup>14</sup> but his appreciation of social analysis and historical awareness characterised all his work afterwards. Even when using his method of ‘typologies,’ constructing timeless ‘ideal-types’ in order to classify and understand dominant trends, he showed extraordinary sensitivity for the sociohistorical contexts of the theologians and movements he discussed.

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13 Ibid. 1929.

14 Ibid. 1937.

In his famous *Christ and Culture*, all this was still very obvious. He never simply looked at ideas, principles or motifs, but also discussed theologians as concrete, living people, within particular historical contexts and movements. This also explains why the proper response expected of the church differed so continuously through his publications. Responsibility, he said, is exercised in society and in time and history, responding to the living God, by telling the full story, interpreting history and discerning God's intentions and actions.<sup>15</sup>

For him, in our interpretation of what is going on in society and culture, in our reading of revelation in history, in our interpretation of God's actions in events and movements, in our decisions as to what is responsible praxis within our situation, we must remember and acknowledge our relativity and limitations, but that should not make us afraid of confessing and acting; instead, it should encourage us to listen to others, especially to those 'on the underside of history', those suffering under a cross, and we should be willing to be converted, fundamentally. What then, finally, is the proper image, the pattern, provided by the revelation in Christ? In a way, the cross of Jesus became for him the basic paradigm with which to interpret and respond to suffering.

### 3. In history?

Even the cross, however, can be used in different ways to tell our story and to discern God's presence in history – as another more recent but again very influential example from a different context may illustrate. One theologian during the 20th century who struggled, like a few others, to discern the presence of God in history in the light of the cross of Jesus Christ is the Dutch *dogmatikus* Bram van de Beek.<sup>16</sup>

His struggle with this question – discerning God's presence – is evident from his earliest work and over decades. In particular, however, he responds to this question in his major Christological works. In increasingly radical fashion, he would focus on the cross of Jesus as the true work and

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15 Ibid. 1963.

16 The literature is extensive. From Van de Beek himself, on these kind of themes, see for example *Waarom? Over Lijden, Schuld en God* (1984), *Nogmaals, Waarom?* (1986), *Tussen Traditie en Vervreemding; Over Kerk en Christenzijn in een Veranderende, Cultuur* (1985), *Waar is God in deze Tijd* (1994), *Psalmen in de nacht* (1994), *Rechtvaardiger dan God: gedachten bij het boek Job* (1992), *Ontmaskering. Christelijk Geloof en Cultuur* (2001), *Hier benede is het niet* (2005), *Is God terug?* (2010). For the following argument and the references, see for example only the overview in Smit (2012)



only presence of God. Even the resurrection, crucially important as it is, should be seen in light of the cross only.

His third Christological study, on God who exercises justice – *God doet recht* – is extremely instructive.<sup>17</sup> ‘What is God doing?’ is the question with which he opens an overview of contemporary theology. His answer, often moving, is that God seems not to be doing anything.

*De dingen gaan zoals ze gaan en zoals ze altijd gegaan zijn ... Zo ver je kunt terugkijken in die geschiedenis, zien we alleen de gewone gang van het wereldgebeuren (Van de Beek 2008:13).*

This is not the experience of a lack of faith, he says, but of faith itself. Contemporary theology, he argues, finds several ways of dealing with this deep spiritual crisis. In diverse ways, theology appeals to the *eschatos* (and resurrection) to provide promises which make more positive interpretations of history and of our experiences possible. We discern signs of the kingdom. We find ways to talk about progress, whether in history and society or in our personal lives. On the whole, contemporary theology is, according to him, an attempt (in diverse ways) at meaning-making, *zinduiding*, discerning some presence of God when in fact God is absent, doing nothing. He finds such attempts in the many contemporary church and theological tendencies from which he regularly distances himself – particularly also in his own teachers, including Berkhof, Van Ruler and the later Barth, in Protestant theology and church life in the Netherlands, in the ecumenical movement and its involvement in so-called life and work activities, but also in the circles of pietism and evangelicalism, with their stress on personal growth and fulfilment of the self. Words that he recognises almost as slogans of these meaning-making attempts to discern and describe a presence and activity of God are, for example, success, growth, progress, and morality.

However, he points out that the need to do theology in this way already goes back to the early church. He describes how, under the conditions of the Constantinian revolution, the incarnation became central (rather than the cross), with similar kinds of spiritual implications. The focus now became the presence of holiness (somehow) in the world – in many ways and forms, but together this led to a loss of eschatology, which radically affected Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, sacramentology, and views on Christian life, all changes that Van de Beek discerns and radically opposes in his work.

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17 Van de Beek 2008.



Over and above this, he opts for Alexandrian theology, following in the footsteps of Athanasius:

*The Alexandrian theology becomes a theology for people who have nothing to lose. It is a theology for people whose entire life is one long Good Friday. It is the theology of people who have lost every illusion that tomorrow will be a better day.*<sup>18</sup>

*Ik richt me daarbij allereerst op mensen die geen enkele hoop meer hebben dat het morgen beter wordt in de wereld. Onder hen reken ik mij zelf. Het gaat om de God die ons gebroken bestaan wil delen tot het einde.*<sup>19</sup>

It is therefore also not enough to speak of Jesus as crucified. The deeper point is that he is crucified as a victim. Jesus suffers as a victim of human power, human violence, human injustice. The cross is not a religious and spiritual symbol, but a harsh and cruel reality. Jesus is slain and slaughtered. Even more, the victim on the tree is innocent, he hangs there because he is cursed, unjustly judged, rejected – and this also by God.

For Van de Beek, this is crucial. God is here at work, God is here judging Jesus, judging the world – in the Crucified. This judgment includes victims and perpetrators alike, moral and immoral, believers and unbelievers. These distinctions – so important for our moral, religious and spiritual sensibilities – all disappear in light of the cross; in fact, they become dangerous and misleading. Here, no-one is moral, no-one is just.

One should therefore say even more. In *The Crucified*, God is judging Godself. The Crucified is the Judge himself. It is the King of Israel hanging on the tree. It is the Lord hanging on the cross, the Lord of glory. It is Godself carrying the judgment there. Van de Beek does not hesitate to use the strongest of expressions to make this point. For him, this is the point. It is Godself hanging on the cross. This is for him the comfort of the gospel. God provides justice. God *does* deliver justice – in spite of all doubts, questions and fears to the contrary. The cries of the victims are not in vain. Their prayers have been answered. That is why the curse-psalms are alien not to the message of the gospel, but to its climax. Whoever does not understand this, does not understand the gospel.

In the cross, the kingdom of God becomes visible in history, and *only* in the cross – not in the resurrection and most certainly not in our erecting any so-called signs of the kingdom. He does not tire in underlining that the

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18 Ibid. 1998:33.

19 Ibid. 1999:22.

cross is the visible mode of God's reign. This is his central argument in *God doet recht*, in response to the questions of doubt and fear – not primarily from the sceptics, but more seriously in the heart of believers – whether God does anything at all.

*God participeert in deze wereld . . . God is de God die slachtoffer is van de wereldgeschiedenis, in de schaar van kinderen, met een moeder die een zwaard door haar ziel heeft gekregen. Dat is het oordeel over onze wereld. Dat is onze diepste realiteit ... Dit is de realiteit van de wereld ... De geschiedenis van Christus legt het wezen van de wereld bloot. Het is een veroordeelde wereld. Het is de wereld waarin God participeert. Hij is gekomen tot het zijne. Aan het kruis is haar God (Van de Beek 2008:283-284).*

If there are signs of the kingdom, they are to be found in suffering and disasters, all caused by God. The many disasters in history become further promises, assurances, that God does indeed act and do justice – since these disasters are all God's works. They are the only positive signs of the coming of the kingdom. 'The hunger in Africa, the epidemic of AIDS, the tsunami in Asia ... This is what God has done' (2008:303, translated). This is how God is coming in the world. He now realises that pneumatology is eschatology. The outpouring of the Spirit is eschatological, except that this should not be understood as future, nor the relationship between Christ and Spirit in historical terms, in linear succession, in terms of outworking, development or progress. In the history of the church this has been the common understanding; also in his own earlier pneumatology, but that is based on misunderstanding – namely understanding the Spirit anthropologically, optimistically, without crisis, and the cross only as intermezzo.

No, the cross is *the* eschatological event, the incursion into God's final judgement. The result is a pneumatology of judgement. To a *christologia crucis* belongs a pneumatology of judgement, just as a pneumatology of progress belongs to an incarnation Christology (whether understood in a personal or an historical way, as progress in one's own spiritual life or progress towards a better future for the world).

There is only one coming (and presence) of Christ, namely the all-too-human history of Jesus on the cross, which then finds some 'extension in time' in that we see this one coming in different moments, different *kairoi*. After the cross, nothing further happens – but the one cross becomes visible in different moments. Over against almost all of 19th and 20th century theology – from Weiss to Wright, from liberal theology to Cullmann and Pannenberg, from Bultmann to Barth – this means for

him that nothing new can happen in history. He qualifies this 'extension in time' again and again, in order to prevent possible misunderstandings. For example, it does not allow a church-historical (often positive and optimistic) interpretation of the (coming of the) kingdom.

Living in the world means forsaking the world. That is why the images of resident aliens and strangers are better suited to describe the Christian life than the image of pilgrims, because the word 'pilgrim' falsely still suggests the idea of some purpose or goal, which believers do *not* have. Sadly, this is denied in many ways – also by ecumenical Protestantism. He is deeply sceptical about all attempts to describe the Christian life in terms of *vivificatio*; about any interest in exercising power; about the pervasive passion in church and theology for morality, social structures and history; about the so-called prophetic role of the church; about any so-called involvement of the church in politics; about the so-called erection of signs of the kingdom; or about any so-called trajectory in history that points towards the *eschatos*. All *these* forms of interest in the world have to do with progress and improvement (whether personal or historical), with exercising power and making sense, with change, transformation and meaningful renewal – and all these he rejects.

Living in this world, believers await the final judgment, which he describes as the day of God's wrath, in direct contrast to all contemporary humanist attempts to see the day within the perspective of God's – free and all-inclusive – love. The proper biblical paradigm for the doctrine of God, he argues, is not love, security and comfort, but justice, particularly justice for the oppressed. Both victims and perpetrators stand under this judgment.

Apart from the cross, there is *no* glory and *no* sense in morality (whether personal or public), in social or political structures (whether in liberal attempts to build up or liberationist attempts to overthrow) or in history (whether individual or communal).

The only possible response is conversion. Conversion means that they recognise God's action in the Crucified and in the circle of all those who also carry their crosses, and that they join this circle, by willingly leaving the social, economic and political structures that determine the face of this world, even giving up their claims to morality – in short, that they leave everything and follow Christ. Ultimately, believers respond by celebrating the eschatological meal.

*Dan kan men zelfs zeggen dat de viering van de eucharistie de realiteit van zijn komen is ... Er is geen reden om angstig 'Nog niet' te roepen*

*als we het messiaanse maal mogen vieren ... Het avondmaal zelf is de viering van de komst van het koninkrijk (2008:330–331).*<sup>20</sup>

It is not without reason that he talks so often about a sense of spiritual crisis. It is the crisis of the possibility of talking about God at all – without anything that happens, without anything visible, without any presence. He sometimes speaks movingly about the ‘slijtage van de tijd’ – which one should not underestimate. He has always been fascinated by the question as to whether and how we can talk about God, ‘(w)ant wij moeten ons niet verbeelden God met onze theologie te kunnen uitbeelden’.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. The Living God?

Hopefully, Van de Beek’s radical *theologia crucis* serves as demonstration that the difficult task remains, even when people agree that the cross of Jesus provides the proper image for us to discern the meaning of revelation, the presence of God in (our) history and world. The cross can be understood in different ways to help us to interpret reality and respond to whatever we experience as claims on us.

It becomes even more complex when our Christology is not only or primarily focused on the cross, but when – say – the incarnation, the life and ministry, the words and works, the resurrection, the ascension and intercession or a future return of Jesus also inform our imaginations more decisively – as David Bosch argued so movingly during SACLA 1 (the South African Christian Leaders Assembly).<sup>22</sup>

It becomes still further complex when not only (or not primarily) Christological convictions and images, but also other concerns and notions building on the second and third articles of the creed influence our imaginations and our reasoning and interpreting hearts. This is of course the case in many circles worldwide in recent theology after the so-called Trinitarian Renaissance.<sup>23</sup>

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20 All references to *God doet recht*, also in Smit 2012.

21 Van de Beek 1994:25–26.

22 Bosch gave his lecture called ‘For such a time as this’ on Sunday 8 July 1979, in other words only months after the eventful day at his home University and Faculty. The gist of the lecture later became part of his influential monograph, *Transforming mission. Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (1991).

23 The literature is overwhelming, but see for example the special edition of the *Journal of Reformed Theology* called *The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Faith and Global Theology*, 3(1), 2009, with an introductory essay by Gijsbert van den Brink with the same title (and extensive references).

One contemporary thinker deeply concerned with discerning the Trinitarian presence and work of the Living God in reality and history is the German systematic theologian Michael Welker.<sup>24</sup> Describing his own theology as biblical–realistic, standing in the Reformed tradition (of Calvin, Barth and Moltmann) and deeply engaged with inter–disciplinary scholarship from a wide variety of fields and traditions (including Whitehead, Luhmann and Polkinghorne), Welker is consciously reflecting on the Trinitarian tradition and from a Trinitarian perspective.

The essay by Welker dedicated to Moltmann on his 80th birthday could serve as representative illustration, also because it is – according to its own subtitle – an attempt to develop a doctrine of the Trinity with biblical orientation. It is called ‘Der erhaltende, rettende und erhebende Gott. Zu einer biblisch orientierten Trinitätslehre’ and it is a contribution in the volume called *Der lebendige Gott als Trinität*.<sup>25</sup>

Welker takes his point of departure in contemporary experiences of disaster, suffering and evil, and asks how it is possible to speak of God and life in the face of these realities? In his own words, only a complex Trinitarian response based on the dynamic biblical account could show the way.

Therefore, he first discusses God as Creator by showing the ambivalence and ultimate lack of comfort of any ‘natural’ creation theology (appealing mainly to Calvin). Not only do believers need to face ‘das ungeheure Maß der Zerstörung and das Ausmaß des Leidens’, but they also have to stop ignoring and denying ‘die unvermeidbare Zerstörungskraft allen physischen Lebens’. since all life exists at the cost of other life. Creation is beautiful and wonderful, yes, but there is also another side to creation and to life. Discerning the presence and work of the Creator may not silently attempt to deny this reality:

*Ich werde im Folgenden zunächst auf die tiefe Ambivalenz und letzte  
Trostlosigkeit einer Wahrnehmung von Schöpfer und Schöpfung  
aufmerksam machen, die sich nur auf die Hervorbringung, Erhaltung  
und Bewahrung der natürlichen Welt konzentriert (2006:36).*

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24 Again, the relevant literature both by and about Welker is overwhelming. For his Trinitarian thought and responses to that, see only the German *Festschrift* dedicated to him on his 60th birthday, *Gegenwart des lebendigen Christus*, G. Thomas & A. Schüle (Hrsg.) (2007), as well as his own two important doctrinal works, *Gottes Geist* (1992), and *Gottes Offenbarung: Christologie* (2012).

25 Welker 2006.

Calvin had already been very clear and honest about the fact that on the basis of these observations alone it is impossible to discern between our own misleading impressions and constructions and true knowledge, since every claim will remain vague and confusing.

*Calvin weist schonungslos darauf hin: Auf dieser Basis können die Menschen niemals zwischen ihren Phantasien und Einbildungen und der wahren Erfahrung Gottes unterscheiden ... Mit vernichtender Nüchternheit stellt Calvin solche frommen Illusionen bloß ... Das Empfinden der Gottheit durch natürliches Ahnvermögen, dem menschlichen Geist eigen, bleibt vage oder – wie Calvin sagt – ein ‘eitles und flüchtiges’ Wissen (2006:40).*

He then deals with the self-revelation of the saving God in the crucified and resurrected Christ (in critical dialogue with Moltmann himself):

*Zweitens wird zu bedenken sein, was es heißt, dass Gott sich erhaltend und rettend, schöpferisch und neuschöpferisch der Welt im gekreuzigten, auferstandenen und erhöhten Christus und durch ihn zu erkennen gibt (2006:36).*

Although the claim that God revealed Godself in Jesus Christ is the central confession of the Christian faith, Welker says – appealing to Luther and to Barmen 1 – that it is not so easy to integrate this claim into our theological knowledge. Does this claim not raise almost unanswerable questions? he asks. How can this claim be related to the claims of the first article of the Trinitarian faith? Is the claim that we can face Godself in the flesh, in suffering, on the cross and in death not completely incomprehensible in comparison to the (already difficult, but in many ways more reasonable) questions of creation?

*Doch wie kommen wir von den schöpfungstheologischen Überlegungen von den Beobachtungen zu den dunklen Seiten der Schöpfung, zu den Grenzen des abstrakten Omnipotenzdenkens und zu den Ambivalenzen der natürlichen Religiösität, wie kommen wir von dort aus zu einem trinitätstheologischen Erkenntniszugang zu Gott? Betreten wir mit der Konzentration auf den Menschen Jesus Christus und auf der Gekreuzigten nicht einfach eine andere Welt, völlig andere Erfahrungsbereiche? Ist die Forderung, im Menschen Jesus und in Kreuz und Leiden Gott zu erkennen, nicht eine unerträgliche Zumutung? Warum wird Gott in der Inkarnation und in Kreuz und Leiden nicht gerade völlig unkenntlich? (2006:42)*

In response to these questions, Welker develops his own Christological views, in this essay in dialogue with impulses from Moltmann.

Finally, he introduces the care for and salvation of creation in the power of the Holy Spirit (engaging with natural scientists, like John Polkinghorne) as a third way of responding to the challenges in the Christian faith and tradition. After all, it may be that Christological answers alone are inadequate to deal with the issues.

*Ist das Leben und Wirken Jesu Christi nicht zu klein, um überzeugend das schöpferische und neuschöpferische Wirken Gottes prägend zum Ausdruck zu bringen? Erst auf diesem Niveau des Fragens erreichen wir die Ebene der zu entfaltenden Trinitätstheologie,' (2006:47) and therefore, he argues, following the Christian creed, '(M)üssen wir (drittens) versuchen, die Kraft des Heiligen Geistes in der Schöpfung und die die Schöpfung erhebende Teilgabe am göttlichen Leben zu erfassen' (2006:36).*

His intention and hope is indeed that such a theological thought process – and *only* such a thought process ('nur die Konzentration auf das Wirken des dreieinigen Gottes') – may help us to see and interpret the Living God and the divine work in the world in a Trinitarian way.

*Mit diesem theologischen Erkundungs- und Gedankengang werden wir an eine Wahrnehmung des lebendigen Gottes und des göttlichen Wirkens in der Schöpfung heranführen, die trinitätstheologisch verstanden und entfaltet werden kann (2006:36).*

However, such a Trinitarian approach will not function as easy explanation or magic formula. It could rather help to sustain the patience of faith and its ability to endure in the midst of destructive meaninglessness and senseless lack of purpose (that Kant observed in history and the world).

*Nicht das Interesse an einem theologischen Glasperlenspiel ist dabei leitend. Die Trinitätslehre soll vielmehr helfen, den langen Atem des Glaubens zu verstehen und zu bewahren inmitten der Erfahrungen zerstörerischer Sinnlosigkeit und 'Zweckwidrigkeit' in dieser Welt (2006:36).<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> All these foregoing quotations are from Welker, 'Der erhaltende, rettende und erhebende Gott. Zu einer biblisch orientierten Trinitätslehre', in *Der lebendige Gott als Trinität*.(2006).

These last sentences are important, since they claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is needed, not only because it provides a more comprehensive theological response, but because in this way it fulfils an important practical, pastoral role, precisely when believers do *not* understand.

Again, it is impossible to enter here into any of the questions raised by this approach. The crucial claim is that only in this complex Trinitarian way can faith hopefully speak more responsibly about such experiences of disaster, since any partial answer would remain inadequate and misleading. A partial answer would not be sufficient. In this way, Welker demonstrates the importance for the tradition of a Trinitarian spread in speaking the language of faith – also in any attempt to discern the presence of the Living God in history and reality.

##### 5. On the kingdom, the power, and the glory?

However, even the use of Trinitarian language and the willingness to search for a Trinitarian spread in our interpretation of what is happening does not guarantee simple spiritual processes and agreement on what to say and do, on the contrary. The doctrine of the Trinity is no fixed pattern or easy solution either to the difficult questions of discernment. It obviously offers no final protection against confusion and the evil imaginations of our heart. Perhaps a brief consideration of the work of an influential contemporary philosopher may serve as helpful reminder that the doctrine of the Trinity may in fact make matters far more complex.

Giorgio Agamben is an Italian philosopher. In the tradition of Foucault, he is engaged in writing a history – or better, a genealogy, and better still an archaeology – of modern politics in the West. In a recent study translated as *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011) he argues that present-day notions of politics in the West can only be understood against the background of Christian theology – although most political philosophers do not realise this at all.<sup>27</sup>

His argument is therefore one continuous engagement with Carl Schmitt, the famous 20th century German legal scholar, who also argued, in his controversial *Political Theology*, that politics can eventually be based only on theology (and therefore also a continuous engagement with Erik Peterson, the opponent of Schmitt and the discussion partner of Karl Barth).<sup>28</sup>

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27 Agamben (2011). The present work is part of a much larger project, called *Homo Sacer*, on the genealogy (or nature) of power in the West. This work is therefore *Homo Sacer II*,<sup>2</sup> in the series, not yet completed.

28 See the influential study Schmitt (2005), as well as the essays published as *Political Theology II: The myth of the closure of any political theology*, M.



Over and above Schmitt, who defended absolute sovereignty (of the political leader, in his case Hitler) over politics and law, who declared that the sovereign possesses absolute power (exemplified in the right to declare a state of emergency, suspending both all political discussion and the rule of law) and who based that on an understanding of the divine sovereignty, Agamben argues that economy (understood to include both what is today called the economy, but also what is called the practical administration of government) is where power really functions.

According to Agamben, Schmitt (like Foucault, albeit in a different way) was therefore correct in his opinion that the paradigm of politics today is to be found in the history of Christian theology, but he was mistaken in his opinion where real power is exercised. It does not belong to the (political) sovereign, but it is distributed all over the economy which includes the government and its administration – and yes, its original paradigm is indeed to be found in the history of Christian theology, namely in the doctrine of the Trinity. The subtitle of his work is therefore ‘For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government.’

This is not the place to enter in detail into his argument on politics and the economy and not even the place to follow his creative and often fascinating reconstruction of the archaeology of the doctrine of the Trinity. We only follow very broad strokes of his argument in an attempt to sense some of the relevance for our theme of discernment of the divine presence and actions.<sup>29</sup>

The key to understanding his discussions of ‘kingdom’, ‘power’ and ‘glory’ lies in the widespread use of the notion of ‘economy’ already in Paul and then in the early church, and in the distinction which then developed between ‘*theologia*’ in the strict sense of the word (also called the immanent Trinity) and ‘*oikonomia*’ as description of God’s actions in history, in Jesus Christ and in the Spirit, through both the One eternally begotten and the One proceeding from the Father, in short, through what is today often called the *missio Dei*.<sup>30</sup>

Put simply, the church became increasingly interested in the economy, in what God was (supposedly) doing. What Paul still described as ‘the economy of the mystery’ (meaning: what we see in Christ is the

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Hoelzl & G. Ward (eds.) (2008). For a recent detailed and authoritative interpretation of Schmitt’s contribution and remarkable influence, see Mehring (2009). For the relationship between Erik Peterson and Barth, see for example Nichtweiss (2005) (with literature).

29 All the following references are therefore to Agamben (2011). For a very helpful discussion, see also Brouwer (2020).

30 For a very insightful discussion of the history and use of the term *missio Dei*, see Flett (2010).

revelation of God's mystery) became 'the mystery of the economy' – a fascination with the questions relating to what precisely was happening and how precisely God was actively involved.

By way of the notion of 'God's will' (which Agamben describes as a kind of invention by the church to overcome the gap, the aporia between theology and economy, between immanent and historical, the fracture between being and action), by way of a very complex doctrine of (different) providence(s), by way of a detailed angelology – and all these he documents in minute philological detail from the history of Christian theology – the church gradually built complex bridges to relate (the inactive immanent Godself) with the actual realities of history and the world.

The kingdom (*theologia*, the immanent Trinity) was seen as inactive, while the real effective power was given to and administered by a diversity of administrators (powers, structures, laws, angels, will, providence, general and special, among others). The power(s) represented the king(dom), even in its own absence and inactivity, increasingly to such an extent that the glory owed to the kingdom, and needed to legitimate the power(s), became more and more real, and was no longer only symbol and ritual.

Again, Agamben provides intriguing examples of glory that was given to material objects and military or cultic events justifying the power(s) in their historical functions of representing the (inactive, absent, immanent) kingdom. The most glorious is perhaps the empty throne, surrounded and adorned with all kinds of regalia – that had to be worshiped as if the power representing the kingdom were in fact present. On his cover is a beautiful picture of such an empty throne, from the Papal Basilica of St. Paul outside the Walls in Rome, but this is just one example of many.

For Agamben, this archaeology is important to show (over against Schmitt) that the sovereign is not that powerful, but is in fact inactive (like the Fisher King of the Grail Legend, or contemporary monarchs in Western democracies, *le roi règne, mais il ne gouverne pas*), and that real power in contemporary societies is exercised by those who administer government and economy, while the public opinion and public media provide the necessary glory, keeping up the glorious appearances of the powers, so that we all believe there is somewhere a king on a throne behind the glories of the spectacles offered to us.

For many other reasons the study is also fascinating for theological readers, including radical implications for issues of providence and notions of secularism. For the purpose of discernment, however, major implications and questions should already become clear.

To put them in Agamben's terms, is it really possible for us to discern the presence and the actions of Godself in our world and in history with the help of the doctrine of the Trinity, if the doctrine of the Trinity was indeed developed to protect the fracture between immanent and economic? Is it really possible for us to reckon with God as living and free, and the future therefore as contingent and open (Durand)? Are we perhaps rather trying to discern the divine economy and mission, the providence of God, the divine will, natural laws and processes, perhaps the role of angels and spiritual powers? In that case, however, is our view on the divine providence or will or natural laws not once again be a kind of pattern, a blueprint, a fixed scheme? Remembering, for example, John Calvin's 159 sermons on the Book of Job, struggling 'to trust in the often incomprehensible providence of God' amidst experiences of darkness, hiddenness, and unknowability – what can we finally know about the *arcana operatio*, the 'secret operation of God'?<sup>31</sup> Could we ever succeed in not being misled by the glory, justifying the powers governing our world, our histories and our lives? Are we in any way able to escape the relativity of our points of view, our stories and our idolatrous imaginations (Niebuhr)? Even when we employ the images of our Christological faith and our Trinitarian creeds, or our discourses of God's providence and will, do our interpretations not remain partial, contested, conflicting, witnesses to our lack of spiritual knowledge (Van de Beek, Welker)? In short, in our attempts at spiritual discernment, what are we truly discerning – and what could be the proper, modest enough language to describe what we are actually doing? Our discourses of discernment are after all also rhetorical languages, and therefore languages of power?

## 6. Concluding comments celebrating CW Burger

I consciously tried to pay tribute to Coenie Burger also by way of my formal treatment of this topic. As so often in our wonderful friendship over so many years, I did not choose the topic, but it was given to me, and in fact if I did not explicitly ask for the topic, I would probably only have seen it today, on the programme. Like so often before, he seems to think that serious systematic theologians should have something to say on any possible theme – without any reflection and preparation (somewhat like Luther on pastors, who should always be immediately ready to pray, preach and die).

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31 See, for example, Smit 'On illness and providence? Questions from the Reformed tradition' (2009) (with extensive literature); but in much more detail the work of Susan Schreiner, for example her *Where shall wisdom be found?* (1994); her *The theater of his glory* (2001); and again her very helpful essay 'Calvin as an interpreter of Job' (2006).

I deliberately tried not to be practical, because he is the practical theologian, often asking me systematic theological questions, because he is keenly interested in systematic theology and convinced of the importance of systematic theological reflection. I know by now that he will draw practical conclusions for himself, on plans and priorities and processes.

I also tried not to give any coherent answer at all, but only to raise a diversity of issues, somehow related to one another. Most of the time, Coenie does not want answers and he will in any case not follow the answers one gives; he is more interested in gathering information, if possible from as many people and many sources as possible, and then he will make up his own mind. He has always been more interested in the conversation itself than in any advice and opinions, more interested in friends and friendship and fellowship than in being told what to do.

I consciously tried to respond to the theme by raising questions, since this is what he often wants to hear. He would often ask one's opinion about possible difficulties and concerns, about potential risks and dangers, about problems that should be taken into account – something that I always appreciated, since I like the question marks more than the answers myself.

I further tried to provide the information and to raise the concerns in the form of references.



## The Trinity In Early Traditions<sup>1-2</sup>

Tanya van Wyk

### 1. Introduction: The significance of the Cappadocian legacy

In the 20th century various theological disciplines and *loci* of Systematic Theology, as well as the social sciences in general, rediscovered the rich heritage of the classic Doctrine of the Trinity (O'Donnell 1988:5–34; see Grenz 2001:25–27). Aspects for reflection ranged from metaphysics in philosophy to morality and spirituality in theology (O'Collins 1999:1–25; see also Bryant 1990:4–20). The phenomenon of 'plurality' was probably one of the most prominent stimuli for the discussion (see Migliore 2004:145). South African systematic theologian, Rian Venter (2011:3), calls it a 'Trinitarian renaissance' and a 'rediscovery of Trinitarian grammar' in his work *Speaking God today*. According to Venter (2011:2, footnote 4), *Theologies of the Other* (Kärkkäinen 2004; Callen 2004; Shults 2005) with their focus on aspects such as class, race, culture and gender, are the point of departure of Alain Badiou's ([2005] 2007:166) statement in the twentieth century that 'the God of monotheisms' is dead.<sup>3</sup> It is against

1 This contribution was originally published in Afrikaans, titled 'Transformasie, partisipasie en pluraliteit – die Kappadosiese erfenis vir die Sistematiese Teologie in die derde millennium', in *HTS Theological Studies* 69(1):2013.

2 In recognition of the academic support Prof Rian Venter over a decade and his legacy of writing and teaching an existential grammar of faith about the Trinity and in recognition of the translation of this contribution from Afrikaans into English by Prof Yolanda Dreyer.

3 Badiou ([2005] 2007) focuses on 75 years of the 20th century, from the beginning of the World War I in 1914 and the Russian revolution of 1917 and ending with the dismantling of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. He criticises totalitarianism as master narrative and proposes counternarratives that are not based on logic and dialectics as epistemology. He replaces 'formalized inhumanism' with 'animal humanism'. Andrew Koch (2009:119) begins his review article on Badiou's book in the journal, *The Philosophy of the Social Sciences* with the following: 'The twentieth century was a century of terror, destruction, and acts of barbarism on a scale never before witnessed in human history. The century began with Herculean acts of genius and the potential to transform the world into something just shy of paradise. Human beings were in charge. God was dead, and for the first

this background that, a decade later, Harvey Cox (1999), in his work *The myth of the twentieth century: The rise and fall of secularization* and Richard Kearney (2010) in his work *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, illustrate the relative value of Christianity in the 20th century.

Jaco de Witt (2008:16–17), a student of Venter's, identified two reasons for the renewed interest in Trinitarian thought. First, the increasing prominence of plurality in the social sciences challenges theologians to communicate very clearly in society on Christian identity and the meaning of a 'Christian life'. He puts it as follows: 'This search to achieve a better articulation about the Christian God led to the re-evaluation of the way we have viewed and conversed about the Trinity in the past' (De Witt 2008:117). Secondly, postmodernity requires that 'God-talk' should be personal. It should be communicated with legitimacy and in dynamic social and relational language, taking modern-day realities into account. For Cunningham (2003:189; see De Witt 2008:17), elements of Trinitarian theology can be useful for meaning-making in a postmodern context.

Venter applies his idea of a 'Trinitarian renaissance' in Systematic Theology to the challenges of being a church in a postmodern world with its changing demographics. Formal and informal urbanisation, inner cities and informal settlements have a particular impact on society. This means that the combination of 'relational Trinitarian' and 'postmodern ecclesiological' thinking has become especially relevant. Venter (2006:201–224) makes a connection between a 'Trinitarian ecclesiology' and a 'philosophy of space'. Engaging with Venter's work and with an emphasis on plurality, this contribution highlights the *ekklēsia* as space. Rather than the more general 'Trinitarian renaissance', the interest here is specifically a 'Cappadocian renaissance'. Where the focus is on *relationships* within the multifaceted and complex realities of the postmodern *ekklēsia*, the Cappadocian legacy is of singular importance. In the earliest 'apostolic church' the aspect of diversity and the *one* Spirit were inseparable:

*Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Cor 12:12–13).*

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time in human history mankind was unleashed from the shackles of superstition and 'ignorance'. Alain Badiou's book, *The Century*, concerns the question of what happened to derail the Enlightenment, Humanism, and all the promise of a Prometheus that was now unchained.'

Paul's 'coordination of relationships', to put it in contemporary systematic theological language, is articulated as follows in Otto Weber's rendition of Karl Barth's ecclesiology (quotation marks and italics indicate Barth's own words and emphases in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Volume IV, 3/2):

*The church is in Christ! This 'order of grace' is simultaneously an 'order of being' ... The Holy Spirit is the power, and the actions of the Spirit are to coordinate the 'being of Jesus Christ' and the 'being of the church', which differs from him, but is included in him ... The Holy Spirit is the power behind the action Jesus Christ took under his own authority. It is only in the Holy Spirit that the being of the church can be a predicate or dimension of the being of Jesus Christ himself. The christological foundation of the church is its pneumatological reality! (Weber [1963] 1967a:319).*

The emphasis on *relational coordination* between Father, Son and Spirit as an ontic connection between 'being' (*Sein*) and 'action' (*Aktion*) reflects the legacy of the Cappadocians. Traces of this heritage can also be found in the work of Schleiermacher (19th century) and Barth (20th century). In Schleiermacher's grammar of faith, the discussion of the Doctrine of the Trinity appears at the end, though it is an implicit point of departure. Barth begins his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* explicitly with the Doctrine of the Trinity (*KD*, 2/1, in Weber [1963] 1967b) – a result of his view of Scripture – (*KD* 1/1 in Weber ([1963] 1967b:11–21) and ends with ecclesiology (*KD* 4/3, in Weber ([1963] 1967b) (see Schüssler Fiorenza, in Mariña 2005:171–188).

A modern theologian, Robert W. Jenson (1982), and a contemporary of Schleiermacher, Johann A. Möhler ([1827] 1996:5, 430), were both of the opinion that Schleiermacher did not connect *being church* and *being a believer* with the classical Cappadocian Doctrine of the Trinity. Theologians such as Richard R. Niebuhr (1964:156), Wolfhart Pannenberg (1991) and Jürgen Moltmann ([1980] 1981) had different perspectives on the matter and were critical of one another (see Muhrmann-Kahl 1997:165–225). They did agree that Schleiermacher was careful not to speak of God in an unwarranted anthropomorphic manner. This was because of the influence of the Kantian differentiation between practical, theoretical and aesthetic rationality. This is the reason for Schleiermacher's ([1830] 1928) implicit rather than explicit presupposition of the overarching role and place of the Trinity in his grammar of faith. Niebuhr (1964:156: cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 2005:172) stated it thus:

*Consequently, the doctrine properly belongs at the conclusion of [Schleiermacher's (1830] 1928] The Christian Faith, for its authentic*



*content is nothing else than the body of the theological exposition of the whole of the faith.*

Möhler ([1827] 1996:79–205) recognised a connection between Schleiermacher's view on the *unity of the church* and the *unity of the Trinity*. However, because of Schleiermacher's ([1822] 1835) comparison between Sabellius and Athanasius, Möhler suspected him of 'Sabellian modalism'.<sup>4</sup> Neither Pannenberg nor Moltmann agreed with this criticism. Schleiermacher's assent with the Cappadocians is apparent especially in his lectures on the historical Jesus based on the prologue of the Gospel of John (see Schleiermacher [1832] 1864).

In Schüssler Fiorenza's (2005) discussion, the nuances of these theologians become apparent. The influence of the Cappadocians is clearly visible, especially in the connection between 'being' (*Sein*) and 'action' (*Aktion*), in other words between the *ontological Trinity* and *ontic relations*. This has an influence on the ethics of being church:

*Although Pannenberg's starting point, which is the relation of Jesus to the Father, is closer to Schleiermacher's Christological starting point, nevertheless his conclusion is quite different in the way he moves from the relation of Jesus to the Father to intra-trinitarian mutuality. Hence, he notes: 'we see a mutuality in their relationship that we do not see in the begetting' [Pannenberg 1991:313]. Although Moltmann likewise [see Muhrmann-Kahl 1997:165–225] begins from a Christological starting point, he underscores the Threeness so much that Walter Kasper [1984:379 footnote 183] discovers the danger of a tendency toward tri-theism. These authors represent a conception of the Trinity opposed to Schleiermacher, although they have been influenced by his starting point and his attempt to link the economy of salvation with the immanent Trinity (Schüssler Fiorenza 2005:185).*

The legacy of the Cappadocians, especially that of Eunomius of Cyricus and Gregory of Nyssa (see Schüssler Fiorenza 2005:187, endnote 17), whose thought influenced these theologians and led to what is today known as the 'social trinitarian ecclesiology', will now be discussed briefly. The section begins with a clarification of terms. The aim is not to analyse and compare the nuances of the various proponents' trinitarian thinking. It is

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4 According to Tertullian, circa 160–220 nC, in his *Adversus Praxean* (vgl. Lossky 1957:58; Meyerdorff 1974:181), Sabellius of Pentapolis (Libia), circa 215 CE (see Rush 1980:10; Moreschini & Norelli 2005b:337–338), did not distinguish between the Father and the Son in the Trinity, as the Cappadocians did.

rather to add some depth to the understanding of the context in which this legacy originated. To this end, concepts and circumstances of the main Cappadocians will be described briefly from secondary sources.

## 2. The Cappadocian narrative

### 2.1 Terminological clarification

At the Council of Alexandria (362 CE) the Greek word *hupostasis* was accepted officially as the equivalent of the Latin *persona*. The Greek formula of the Cappadocians for the Trinity, *mia ousia, treis hupostaseis*, was officially validated. According to Engelbrecht (1978:138),<sup>5</sup> Calvin and Melancton were of the opinion that the Cappadocian terminology for describing the Trinity – ‘one being, three persons’, with the Latin equivalent *una substantia, tres personae* – was irreplaceable. The confession that the Son was *homoousios, consubstantia* (one substance) with the Father, was rendered by means of three terms, namely ‘one substance’, ‘Trinity’ and ‘persons’. ‘Substance’ also refers to *phusis, natura* and *essentia*. ‘Person’ also refers to *subsistentia* and *prosopon*, whereas ‘Trinity’ also refers to *Trinitas* and *proprietas*. The Reformers used these terms to take a stand against Arianism and Sabellianism (Engelbrecht 1978:139). In order to establish a clear distinction from Sabellius, the Latin church preferred *persona* over the Greek *prosopon* (cf. Bethune-Baker 1903:105, 234–235). The term *homoousios* was translated as *consubstantia* and *ousia* as *substantia* in Latin. Confusion ensued since *substantia* as a juridical term could also refer to the substance that all three persons possessed communally (Bethune-Baker 1903:235). It could also refer to the specific property owned by this person, which distinguishes this person from the other. *Substantia* then refers to a *distinctio*, a distinction, in the sense of the juridical term *species* (a specific item that has been bought, not a random item from a similar group). Hilary of Poitiers (see Moreschini & Norelli 2005a:258–260; cf. Meijering & Van Winden 1982) also used *substantia* to refer to the three distinct persons of the Trinity – there are three substances in God (Calvin [1559] [1931] 1956:102–105).<sup>6</sup> Dionysius of Rome (*Epistula ad Dionysium Alexandrinum*) used *ousia* and *hypostasis* interchangeably. Dionysius of Alexandria (see

5 This overview is based on B.J. Engelbrecht (1978) who in turn made use of the paradigmatic classification of Théodor de Regnon (1892) in *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainte Trinité*.

6 Hillarius (*De Trinitate* I.iii): ‘nos filii Dei sumus, sed non talis hic filius. Hic enim verus et proprius est filius origine, non adoptione, veritate, non nuncuptaione, nativitate, non creatione.’ Engelbrecht’s reference to Hilary is from Calvin’s (*Institutes* I, 13, 5) (cf. Meijering & Van Winden 1982).

*The divine names* 4.1:709B, in Moreschini & Norelli 2005a:668–670) used the terms to differentiate between ‘substance’ and ‘person’. Origin did not differentiate between the Greek terms *ousia*, *hupostasis*, *hupokeimenon* and *prosopon*. Athanasius (in *De sancta trinitate* 1970:80–126, 307–334) used the terms *theotēs* [divinity], *ousia* [substance], *hupostasis* [person], *idiotes tēs ousias* [authenticity of being], *oikeiotēs tēs hupostaseōs* [property of the *hupostasis*] interchangeably. These terms were used to differentiate between *essential* and *accidental* characteristics. It was not about the sum total of the characteristics, but rather about the underlying aspects. According to Athanasius, the ‘person’ (*hupostasis*) is equal to the ‘substance’ (*ousia*). The meaning of the person is the being itself (*auto to on*). Athanasius equated *hupostasis* and *ousia* [person and substance] completely and also equated these terms with *theotēs* [divinity] (cf. [Von] Harnack 1888:215).

The term *physis* [nature] initially had the same referential meaning as *ousia* and *essentia*, namely ‘substance’. Church Fathers Athanasius and Tertullian qualified these ‘terms’ more closely in the debate on the dogma of the two natures. Tertullian (*De testimonio anima* 32; see Moreschini & Norelli 2005b:325–326) differentiates between substance and the nature of substance (*aliud est substantia, aliud natura substantiae*). Human beings and animals have the same *natura*, but do not have the same *substantia*. God’s *substantia* refers to God’s uniqueness. No other being has the same *substantia* as God. If Jesus is said to have the *substantia* of God, it amounts to the confession that Jesus is God. According to Tertullian’s distinction, two entities that have the same *substantia* do not necessarily have the same *natura* (*physis*). *Natura*, according to Tertullian, is the sum total of the characteristics of an entity, whereas the *substantia* carries the characteristics. *Substantia* is the essence, the authentic being. In Tertullian’s understanding of the dogma of the two natures, the *substantiae* is preferable to *naturae*. Should *natura* be used for Jesus, it would indicate that Jesus possesses the characteristics of God and human beings, but that Jesus is not essentially God and human. For Tertullian (see [Von] Harnack 1888:300), *substantia* had historical baggage and *natura* is insufficient. He therefore preferred the term ‘status’: *Videmus duplicem statum, non confusum, sed conjunctum in una persona, deum et hominem Jesum* [not a mixture, but a double status which comes together in one person, Jesus, God and human being] ([Von] Harnack 1888:300; cf. Bethune-Baker 1903:139–140). Athanasius had a similar understanding ([Von] Harnack 1888:235). The *physis* is the complex of characteristics of *ousia*, but *ousia* ‘carries’ characteristics and refers, in the Aristotelian sense, to the *essential* (‘authentic’) *substance*. The Son is equal to the Father (*homoiōsis*

*tou huiou pros ton patera kata tēn ousian kai kata tēn phusin*), in substance and in nature.

Given the initial identification of *phusis* with *ousia*, it was not problematic for the Greek church to refer to the divine and human *phuseis* [nature] of Jesus Christ. Tertullian's distinction, however, had a significant influence on the Latin church. Here the terms *substantia* and *essentia* were preferred to *natura*. In the 30th *Epistola Dogmatica* (in Wiles & Yarnold 2011:587), Pope Leo described the Trinity as *utraque natura*, but added *et substantia*. Heremitus Vincentius (in Kelly 2002:113) described the dogma of the two natures by using the plural form *substantiae*: *modus uniti substantiae* and *modus informantis substantiae*. He accused Nestor of confusing *persona* and *substantia* and arguing that Jesus Christ had two *personae* (*divina et humana*) (see Moreschini & Norelli 2005b:566–571). This is then the frame of reference of the Council of Chalcedon. First the Council stated that there were two *substantiae* in Christ and thereafter that in the person of Christ there were two *naturae*. In this way the initial meaning of *natura* (*phusis*) was retained, namely *natura* as equal to *essentia*, *ousia* and *substantia*. In Articles 27–35 of the Credo named after Athanasius, *substantia* is therefore to be found. It refers to the two 'substances' of Christ and not the two 'natures'. In Reformed credos *natura* (*phusis*) is used. In the Belgic Confession in Article 29 it is used to indicate *substantia* (Engelbrecht 1978:143). In the Heidelberg Catechism,<sup>7</sup> *natura* is used in Question and Answer 35 and 47. It is used in the sense of *natura humana*. In this Confession, the divinity of Christ is not referred to in terms of *natura*, but rather in terms of *majestas et gratia*. The Heidelberg Catechism hereby confesses that Jesus was 'truly God' and that he was human in all respects except for sin (Van den Brink 1940:92–95).

The term *morphē* (*forma*) was often used for *ousia* (*substantia*). The Latin church found the term *natura* insufficient because it was not descriptive enough. The question was then: which terms would be sufficiently descriptive? Augustine used *filius Dei* instead of *natura divina* and *filius hominis* rather than *natura humana* (see Bethune-Baker 1903:233). Hilary used *forma Dei* and *forma servi* to differentiate between the divine and human nature of Jesus. Hippolytus of Rome referred to the words of Paul in Philippians 2:6, *en morphē tou theo huparchōn*, and concluded that Jesus was *en ousia theo huparchōn*. Tertullian translated *morphē* as *status* and *conditio*.

7 For references to the Belgic Confession, the Credo named after Athanasius, and the Heidelberg Catechism, see Schaff (1977:186–197, 377–380).

This overview of Engelbrecht of the terminology used in the Doctrine of the Trinity, provides the background for understanding the Cappadocian narrative in its context. The framework of Frances M. Young and Andrew Teal ([1983] 2010:135–172) is followed to articulate this narrative.

## 2.2 The three Cappadocians: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Naziansus and Gregory of Nyssa

The three Cappadocians contributed substantially to the formulation of the classical Doctrine of the Trinity. They did more, however. They contributed to the creation of a language of faith and the use of imagery. Their insights were adopted widely in biblical, spiritual and doctrinal traditions. Doctrinal traditions, however, also developed beyond their language. Each of the Fathers made a dynamic and unique contribution to the articulation of the classical Doctrine of the Trinity. Some aspects of their work are especially relevant to the church today. One such aspect is the tension between and the accommodation of *faith* and *culture* over and against the so-called monastic ideal. The Cappadocians found a balance between these two extremes. This balance will prevent the church as institution from becoming completely absorbed into the world on the one hand, or retreating completely to a desert of isolation on the other hand.

The lives and work of the three Cappadocians were intertwined. All three hailed from Christian families. Peter, a brother of Basil and Gregory, also became a bishop. Their mother and sister were later canonised. The father of Gregory of Nazianzus, a friend of Basil and Gregory, was a bishop. The three of them grew up among devout Christian believers. Their faith tradition had a significant influence on their imagery, language and attitude toward faith. Their individual calling, however, transcended their immediate context with its specific historical frame of reference. Their families were from the upper classes in Cappadocia (see Van Dam 2002:13). In spite of their Christian background, all three were also exposed to broader society. They received a classical education (Mitchell 1993:77–79; Sartre [2001] 2005:417). Basil studied in Caesarea, the capital of Cappadocia, as well as in Constantinople and Athens. Gregory of Nazianzus also studied in Athens, but chose Alexandria above Constantinople. Gregory, the brother of Basil, also received a classical education, though not as extensive as that of his brother.

In 370 CE Eusebius died and Basil was the logical successor. His election as bishop of Cappadocia and his reign were fraught with power struggles (McGuckin 2001a:79; 2001b). He attempted to consolidate his status by creating new political positions. He appointed Gregory of Nazianzus in one such position. His younger brother, Gregory, was elected

bishop of the town of Nyssa. Their relationship became strained because of Basil's politics.<sup>8</sup> At the time, an 'Arian-minded emperor' was in power (Young & Teal [1983] 2010:139). Basil was a protector of Nicaean orthodoxy, which brought him into conflict with emperor Valentinian. Basil's work on the Holy Spirit was 'a careful and limited gloss on the simple teaching of Nicaea' (Rousseau 1994:276).

Basil died in 379 CE. Gregory of Nazianzus heard of his death while he himself was seriously ill. Theodosius had become emperor. Gregory was the obvious choice for the position of bishop of Constantinople. His appointment would protect the Nicaean theology. Gregory published prolifically. He continued his brother's emphasis on and defence of the Holy Spirit. In 381 CE, Theodosius convened the Council of Constantinople, where both the Gregory brothers defended orthodoxy. Gregory of Nazianzus, elected bishop of Constantinople, was so repulsed by the political machinations of the bishops during the Council that he withdrew and isolated himself. He resigned as bishop and continued his defence of orthodoxy in his writings. The Council had rejected his emphasis on the divinity of the Holy Spirit and issued a rather vague confessional statement that did not include the term *homoousion*. He resided in Nazianzus and continued writing until his death in 390 CE. Gregory, the brother of Basil, was not isolated in this manner. He often travelled to the East in service of the church, politics and the emperor.

During this period the inordinate emphasis on monasticism caused much tension. It was about the conflict between a life of seclusion and contemplation over against a life of social responsibility and leadership. The life of Gregory of Nazianzus attests to this tension. He was pulled in both directions (McGuckin 2001a:37–54). Basil was also influenced by this tension. In his writing he tried to find a balance between the two extremes of public theology and ascetic life (see Torrance 2012:230). However, he did not succeed in putting this theoretical balance into practice. Gregory, his brother, was more successful with the integration of these opposites. For example, in his work, *De Virginitate*, he discussed celibacy, though he himself was married (Gregorius Nyssenus [c. 335–395], *De virginitate*, in Silvas 2007:48–53). It was the ideal of the three Cappadocians to bring about a balance between the extremes (Young & Teal [1983] 2010:135). They grappled with the relationship between Christian tradition and contemporary culture and whether that relationship would be one of

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8 It was a complicated friendship. Basil was frustrated with the two Gregory brothers' misappropriation of church funds. Gregory of Nazianzus accused Basil of betraying their youthful ideal of 'a life of philosophy'. Gregory, the brother of Basil, felt inferior to the other two (see Moreschini & Norelli 2005b:86–89, 89–96).

tension or accommodation. This ideal reflects their own theological beginnings that hark back to Origin. He was both devoted to Scripture and engaged actively with the Greek philosophical tradition (see Rousseau 1994:4).

Basil also made use of Greek philosophy in his work. He found an example of 'good philosophy' in Homer and Plato. He adopted the questions and methods of philosophers in his own work. Many of their examples, illustrations and proposals are to be found in his writings (see Mitchell & Young 2006:595). However, as the 'official representative of the orthodox church', he also criticised the philosophers and scientists for concerning themselves with questions that cannot be answered and then proposing solutions from their 'arrogant human reasoning'. In the process of criticising them, he demonstrated his own knowledge of the natural sciences, especially astronomy. It seems as though Basil reached a synthesis between 'biblical teaching and selected elements of the profane systems' (Young [1983] 2010:148).

Gregory of Nazianzus was especially intrigued by cultural matters. He contested emperor Julian's attempts to bar Christians from education (see Elm 2012:157). He opposed the supposition that the Greek language, mathematics and poetry are 'heathen'. In his opinion, no race or nation could have an exclusive claim to culture (see Young & Teal [1983] 2010:148). Gregory found that such 'intellectual tools' should be available for the training of theologians and the development of apologetics. A large component of his *Orationes* (see Asmus 1910:325–367) was dedicated to this point of view. The work of Gregory of Nyssa also attests to oratory proficiency, especially three eulogies he delivered in Constantinople (Børtnes & Hägg 2006:243–253). Gregory had an intimate knowledge of the works of Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus and Lamblichus, as well as the philosophical traditions of the Platonic school in Athens (see Turcescu 2005:50). Over the centuries this frame of reference has been reflected in the church and the message of the church. The Christian tradition was interpreted through the lens of contemporary culture (Young & Teal [1983] 2010:151). However, at the same time, the church distanced itself from other religions. This duality also influenced the framework of the three Cappadocians. The ambivalence in their work laid the foundation for a Christianised culture which simultaneously makes use of some non-Christian traditions and distances itself from others.

In summary, one could therefore say that all three of the Cappadocians were involved in the controversial doctrinal issues of their time. This was then also the main focus of their oeuvre. The era between 360 and 370 CE was a confusing time. Alliances were formed and political shifts



took place, all of which had an influence on church and theology. Basil attempted to form an alliance with Athanasius and the Western Church in order to consolidate a 'neo-Nicene' position (Young [1983] 2010:156). This position was defended by his brother and friend, especially before and after the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE. Though each of the three represented a specific theological focus, their theology influenced the central debates of the day. These debates were again revived during the Renaissance (Beeley 2008).

The Cappadocian heritage was taken further in the apology against Eunomius. He followed Aetius, who insisted that the essence of the Father and that of the Son were incomparable. In 360 CE Basil attempted to repudiate the theological convictions of Eunomius in his *Apologia* titled *Contra Eunomium* (in Hildebrand 2007:213). In the first of the three volumes of this work, he argued that *agennēsia* [not begotten] was not an essential characteristic of the Divinity. The other two volumes were about the essential equality of the Son (Book 2) and the Holy Spirit (Book 3) with the Father.

After the death of Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus continued to oppose the Eunomian position in public debates in Constantinople. Basil's brother, Gregory, engaged with Eunomius's reply to Basil's *Contra Eunomium*. Gregory of Nyssa wrote various shorter treatises in defence of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. He completed the treatise *Ad Ablabium* [Not three gods], towards the end of his career (see Coakley 2003; cf. Barnes 2001). The fundamental aspects of Trinitarian orthodoxy stemmed mainly from these treatises and the reactions they elicited (see Karfikova, Douglass & Zachhuber 2007; Ludlow 2007).

The central argument of Eunomius was that God can be 'known' because God is a 'unity'. God cannot be separated, and is not sometimes this and sometimes that. The one *ousia* of God cannot be divided into a threefold *hupostaseis*, because God is absolutely one at all times (*Refutatio Confessionis Eunomii* 33, in Moreschini & Norelli 2005b:126–127). Eunomius argues that the unity of God is possible only if the elevated and absolute One is isolated from the second and the third. That God is not begotten (*agennēsia*) is, for Eunomius, the divine attribute that guarantees the simplicity and uniqueness of God. However, Gregory uses the same description to argue that a plurality of the hierarchy of 'separate beings' is impossible because one 'eternal being' cannot be greater or less than another 'eternal being'. There are three 'subjects', but the fact of their infinity means that they cannot be distinguished as three. There is 'existence' and there is 'non-existence', but there are no degrees of 'being'. The crux of Gregory's argument, which was similar to



that of his brother Basil, was to oppose the idea that a *hierarchy* in 'Being' or 'Substance' is at all possible. The attempt of Eunomius to distinguish between God and creation led to a 'hierarchical' understanding of God's existence (see Vaggione 2000:336–340). Gregory accepted the distinction that Eunomius made between God and creation as a fundamental truth. However, for Gregory, God was a 'Trinitarian God'. 'Father' and 'Son' were not different 'beings', but rather an eternal relationship within one 'Divine Being'. Without the Son, the Father has no 'existence' or 'name' (*Refutatio* 6–7; *Ad Ablabium* 117, in Moreschini & Norelli 2005b:126–127). Because Gregorius gave a generic definition of the *ousia* shared by the Father, Son and Spirit using the analogy of the *ousia* that human beings share universally (for example, Peter, John and James), he was accused of tri-theism (*Contra Eunomium* I. 202, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* 1–2, in Jaeger 1960). Gregory also used the term 'generation'. He argued that, in the 'generation' of a child, the 'substance' of the father was not diminished or divided. Because of this possibility of the generation of a separate individual, it could be problematic to base a monotheistic theology on the argument of a shared *ousia*. Gregory's definition of 'divine substance' preempted this problem. If 'divine substance' is in principle indivisible and undifferentiated and a number cannot be allocated to 'divine simplicity', if 'one' and 'one' and 'one' do not add up to 'three', and if they are all 'infinite' and cannot be placed next to one another, but only exist *in one another*, then the 'unity' of God is ensured. If divine substance is in principle unchangeable, then the mutual relationships within the Trinity are infinite and non-hierarchical (cf. Beeley 2008).

The debate on the Doctrine of the Trinity also engendered a debate on theological language (cf. Maspero 2010:17–31). Eunomius argued that all descriptions of the 'Logos' were analogical and that 'Son of God' was *metaphorical* rather than *literal*. Gregory accepted the analogical nature of descriptions and titles such as 'rock', 'door', 'way' and 'shepherd', but differentiated between these descriptions and those that referred to the 'essence' of things. For Gregory, 'Son' should be understood more literally than metaphorically (*Contra Eunomium* III, in Jaeger 1960:127–141). Terms that describe Christ's relationship to humanity would be analogical, whereas terms that describe Christ's relationship to God would be essential. Gregory emphasised that God was incomprehensible and unfathomable. Therefore he could be criticised for his attempt to articulate anything at all about God. He acknowledged that all names and descriptions of God were inadequate expressions devised by human beings. However, all these terms were rooted in the *being* and *action* of God, as revealed in the Bible. This provides sufficient grounds for developing theological constructs. Because of the enormous distance between Creator and creation, these

terms and descriptions should be evaluated critically. The terms tend to be simultaneously applicable and misleading. Metaphor and analogy always also have an 'is-not' character. There is always a difference, a non-equality as well. According to Gregory, the attempt of Eunomius to define the 'substance/being' of God was rather arrogant (Young [1983] 2010:159).

This debate on the Doctrine of the Trinity was accompanied by a debate on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Basil argued for the divinity of the Spirit (see his treaty against Enomius, *Contra Eunomium* III, in Jaeger 1960:110, 127–141). His *De Spiritu Sancto* of 375 CE provided an exposition of this argument (cf. Anderson 1980). Some years later Ambrosius based his *De Spiritu Sancto* on the work of Basil. This in turn served as the basis for the exposition of Trinitarian theology by the two Gregory brothers. Though Basil did not refer to the *homoousion* of the Holy Spirit, Gregory of Nazianzus did (Young & Teal [1983] 2010:141). After the death of Basil in 379 CE, his brother Gregory took the debate on the Holy Spirit further, bringing Christology also into the picture. The doctrinal problems created by Arius were solved successfully by the Cappadocians' Doctrine of the Trinity for the Orthodox Church. The transcendence of God which complicated the possibility of a relationship between God and the world and for which the mediation of 'Logos' was needed no longer presented a problem since 'Logos' partook in the transcendence of God. In the Doctrine of the Trinity of Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus (in response to that of Eunomius), based largely on the work of Apollinarius, they did not refer to 'two sons' (which would implicate Jesus and the Spirit) in their Christology. After the Council of Constantinople they came into conflict with Apollinarius. With Gregory of Nazianzus' explanation of 'that which cannot be adopted, cannot be redeemed', he countered the argument of Apollinarius that Christ did not have a 'human soul'. Gregory, the brother of Basil, countered Apollinarius with the argument that Christ's 'human nature' was recreated and that this change in Christ 'marks the beginning of the transformation in which each of us is called to participate' (Daley 2003:432–436).

### 3. In conclusion: The Cappadocian legacy and a theology of 'the Other'

The two terms *transformation* and *participation* constitute the epistemological core of the Cappadocian heritage. This legacy can be seen in the recent emphasis on the significance of a 'Trinitarian ecclesiology', in spite of the 'academic' argument that the Cappadocian Doctrine of the Trinity is too abstract and 'anthropological'. This was the thought of some 20th century scholars whose religion criticism culminated in the

pronouncement that the 'God of monotheism' was dead. Ludwig Feuerbach ([1841] [1853] 2008:294) pointed to the 'anthropological origin' of the Christian faith. He quotes Hillary (*De Trinitate* I.iii, in Moreschini & Norelli 2005b:258–260) as substantiation.<sup>9</sup>

With the rise of 'plurality' in the third millennium, the epistemological significance of the terms 'transformation' and 'participation' derived new meaning in light of the Cappadocian emphasis on *being* and *action* in the ontology of ethics (cf. Migliore 2004:145; Naudé 2007; Smit 2006:73–92; Venter 2004:207–239.<sup>10</sup> Rian Venter (2011:2, footnote 4) has connected this 'renaissance' with contemporary 'theologies of *the Other*'. He incorporates social aspects such as race, culture and gender.

In a lecture on 26 September 1922, Karl Barth ([1924] 1925:125–155) described the '*Synthese von Christentum und Kultur*' (merging of Christianity and culture) as a problem of contemporary ethics ('*Das Problem der Ethik in der Gegenwart*'). In recent times, Karl Dienst (2012:22), in his work '*Kirche mitten in der Stadt*' (Church in the middle of the city) refers to this phenomenon as the '*soziokulturelle Volkskirchenmilieu*' (cf. Dienst 2012:21, 45, 47). In reaction to this milieu, human rights have become universally prominent. Habermas ([1998] 2001:119–120), however, described it as 'masked hypocrisy':

*'So-called equal rights may have only been gradually extended to oppressed, marginalized, and excluded groups. Only after tough political struggles have workers, women, Jews, Romanies, gays, and political refugees been recognized as 'human beings' with a claim to fully equal treatment. The important thing now is that the intellectual advances in emancipation reveal in hindsight the individual advances that human rights had fulfilled up to that times. That is, the egalitarian claim to*

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9 Hillarius, *De Trinitate* I.iii: Nos filii Dei sumus, sed non talis hic filius. Hic enim verus et proprius est filius origine, non adoptione, veritate, non nuncuptaione, nativitate, non creatione'.

10 Naudé (2007:9) articulates it as follows: 'Unity was not only important to the New Testament churches. Throughout history the unity of the church was threatened by internal differences. In the fourth century when the church was just more than 300 years old, serious doctrinal difference ensued. It was about how God could be one. This led to a significant church council in the town of Nicea in the year 325. This was followed by a council in Constantinople in 381. This is where the churches confessed: We believe in one God, Father, Son and Spirit, though they are three Persons, and though Christ has two natures. They also confessed the marks of the church: Over and against our dissent, we believe in one church, built on the teachings of the apostles, and catholic.' Naudé (2007:9) states explicitly that the *unity* transcends church denominations.

*universal validity and inclusion had also always served to mask the de facto unequal treatment of those who were silently excluded.'*

Habermas exposes this 'false universality', which he describes as the 'abstractive fallacy' of a Platonistic 'Western notion of reason' with an 'imaginary humanity' which fails 'to provide every voice with a hearing' (Habermas [1998] 2001:120; original emphasis). The challenge is to develop a democratic order which is simultaneously particular and universal. Such a 'constellation' (in reference to Habermas' notion of a 'postnational constellation'), requires values that can dissolve the double tension of inclusivity-exclusivity and unity-diversity. These values presuppose participation and transformation, being and action, in order that radical inclusivity does not remain a theoretical and abstract imagining, but can come to fruition in practice. From a political perspective, Habermas [1998] 2001:73) finds democracy to be the most viable model. The challenges are to learn from the catastrophes of the 20th century in a self-critical manner and to address the contemporary problem of the 'plurality' of human rights in a way than ensures human dignity for all. This will require *inclusion without exclusion* (Habermas 1996:154–184).

With regard to this, Mannion (2007:xii) quotes Rahner to describe the 'church's task as a whole' as follows:

*It is hoped that the church may become ever more truly a sacramental sign and mediation of the triune God who is love so that the church might demonstrate all the more vividly in its relations both ad intra and ad extra that Deus caritas est.*

The application of this terminology from the Cappadocian Doctrine of the Trinity to ecclesiology in a postmodern context today shows the correlation between ontology and ethics to be the central issue for being church today. The main challenge is that the love of God should manifest in the church. The most important *nota ecclesiae*<sup>11</sup> should not be betrayed. This has to do with the tension between unity and plurality and the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity.

In a re-evaluation for today of the theology of the Cappadocians as reflected in their life histories, the emphasis will be on 'person', rather than on 'substance' only. This represents a shift from the impersonal to the personal, from not being involved (abstraction) to participation. In the

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11 This is commensurate with the conviction of Ulrich Körtner (2010:416–426) and Ulrich Luz (2010:404–415) that *agapē* (love) is the focal point of the *notae ecclesiae*.

words of systematic theologian Paul S. Fiddes (2000), this is an indication of 'a pastoral doctrine of the Trinity'. The emphasis of the Cappadocians on 'economy' alongside 'immanence' confirmed the significance of ethics. Their legacy for the third millennium is the language and tools to make reconciling diversity a reality. For the Christian church, it provides the possibility to create a space for reconciling diversity – a space where unity will not be threatened by diversity and the one will not fear the Other.

## The Trinity in the Roman Catholic Tradition

Valentine Ugochukwu Iheanacho

### 1. Introduction

Walter Kasper in his book *The God of Jesus Christ* makes this bold assertion: ‘The confession of one God in three persons is rightly regarded as proper and specific to Christian faith in God’ (Kasper 1986:233). The Catholic Church alongside the Orthodox Church consider themselves as the two surviving arms of the ancient church with regard to the creeds and the first seven ecumenical councils before their mutual schism. In light of this fact, both churches can be described as creedal churches. In various manners, they officially and formally, as well as liturgically, recognise and profess the creeds as formulated by the ancient councils. It is not an overstatement to affirm that both churches rise and fall with the creeds, and at the very centre of it all, stands the firm belief in one God in three persons. Reframed somewhat differently, the church’s trinitarian doctrine acknowledges that ‘... in God there is a unity of substance and a trinity of persons or a unity of substance in a trinity of persons’ (Kasper 1986:234). As Thomas Weinandy rightly observes, early trinitarian faith and proclamation occurred and flourished within the church’s doxological ambient. Thus, within that same ecclesial environment, according to Weinandy, ‘[t]he church gathers as the people of God in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and worships the Father through the Son in the Spirit’ (Weinandy 1995a:3). Like other creedal churches, its languages of prayer, hymns, catechism and actions are suffused with strong trinitarian symbolism, language and theology.

The dogma of the Trinity constitutes the nucleus of the Christian faith. It is a constant referent in Christianity and has continued to be upheld and adhered to, by successive generations of Christians. In numerous ways, reflections on the Trinity contributed to western speculative thinking which in turn has produced an inexhaustible body of literature (Helmer 2003:127–128). It has led, for instance, to rational inquiries and studies about the existence and essence of God as well as the speculation on the question of the divine attributes, and whether or not God is knowable.

In the words of Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274), ‘knowledge of the Trinity in unity is our whole life’s fruit and goal’ (cited in McDermott 2012:113). However, on account of the near presence of heresy, Augustine of Hippo (the father of western theology) wisely cautioned that trinitarian theology carries the perennial risk of being a complex aspect of inquiry (Letham 2002a:35). As he surmised: ‘In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable’ (cited in Letham 2002a:28).

Over the centuries, trinitarian discourse has produced controversies on its thralls. Amidst debates and contentions, the tag of heresy has wilfully and unwittingly been smeared at opponents of divergent positions. It has generated a considerable lexicon of accusations such as modalism, subordinationism, Sabellianism, and Origenism. The purpose of this article is not to recount these trinitarian controversies. The aim is to trace as much as possible trinitarian theology through the conceptual frame of Catholic tradition. It adopts a historical approach to the comprehension of trinitarian doctrine within the Catholic Church. In light of historical evidence, it concludes that, despite differences in perspectives and emphases, the Latin and the Orthodox churches have preserved intact their belief in the Trinity as a common doctrinal and theological heritage of both sister churches. In terms of semantics, Latin and Greek are used interchangeably in this article to refer to the Western and Eastern churches, respectively.

## 2. A doubled-sided confession of faith

Classical trinitarian theology began with probing into *mysterium salutis*. It was the inquiring attempts of the ancient church about soteriology that laid the foundation for Trinitarian and Christological dogmas that became crystallised in creedal formats (Wilgenburg 2010:329). Territorially bounded within the two main parts of the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean basin, the church in its two main branches during the post-apostolic era, approached the Trinity differently. While the Latin West began with the unity of God (*de Deo Uno*), the Greek East, for its part, started off with the Three Persons of the Trinity (*de Deo Trino*) (Drever 2007:235). Lewis Ayres has perceptively noted that the trinitarian propositions of either side of the divide, especially after the Council of Nicaea (325), were framed on the basis of safeguarding ‘the irreducibility of the divine nature, power, essence, and glory’ (Ayres 2007:142). This was also true about ‘the irreducibility of the divine persons or hypostases’ (Ayres 2007:142). Put differently, the West affirms one substance existing in three Persons, and the East acknowledges three Persons in God existing as one substance.

It is within the above context that traditional trinitarian theological formulation of the Father-Son-and-Spirit, and the Father's *monarchia*, was understood (Ayres 2007:142). As far as the West is concerned, preservation of the oneness of God, permits it to proceed in consideration of the being of the Godhead where the Father is the Father since he begets the Son. He subsists in relation to the Son and the Spirit. Employing their subsisting relations, the West affirms the distinct identities and oneness of the three Divine Persons. On the flip side, traditional Eastern trinitarian theology believes that the Father is the sole source of the Son and the Spirit. The unity of the Trinity is located in the Father, who is the fount of the divine processions, and intimate inter-relatedness of the three Divine Persons through their mutual co-inherence (Weinand 1995a:6-7). The theological differences between the West and the East go beyond mere emphases. Those differences also concern conceptual contrasts in their understanding of the Trinity. Nevertheless, it may be safely assumed that the two halves of the ancient church consider the Trinity as a fundamental Christian article of faith. Of crucial importance are the accompanying two rules that characterised classical trinitarian theology. One rule ensures that the 'outer-Trinitarian' works are understood as the works of the three Divine Persons. The second rule guarantees that the three Divine Persons are carefully distinguished in 'inner Trinity' (Hilmer 2003:143).

Naturally and expectedly, each of the two sister churches had its own theological luminaries, although the Latin West, unlike the Greek East, also lays claim to the Eastern Fathers. For instance, Athanasius of Alexandria is venerated as a saint and doctor *ecclesiae universalis* in the Roman Catholic tradition. In addition, he is accorded the honour of being the protagonist of orthodoxy with regard to the Trinity and Christology (Wilgenburg 2010:337). With peculiar nuances, Athanasius, Augustine, the Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) as well as John Chrysostom, made significant contributions to classical trinitarian orthodoxy (O'Collins 2002:363). Pointedly, trinitarian theology of both West and East are founded upon the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed alongside the *Quicumque Vult*. The *Quicumque* is popularly known as the Athanasian Creed since it is traditionally attributed to the Alexandrian father. Particularly, without the addition made at the Council of Constantinople in 381, the Nicene Creed appears to be the first formal conciliar statement on the Trinity. Edward Siecienski postulates that the Athanasian Creed may have been written in the West between the late fifth and early sixth centuries (Siecienski 2015:10).

Although the pope was represented at Nicaea by two presbyters, western theologians were somewhat not in the know about the controversies that ensued in the East especially after the close of the Nicene



Council. As Jörg Ulrich has demonstrated, the Nicene Creed may not have been well known in the west until about towards the end of the AD 350s. He cites the example of Hilary of Poitiers, who acknowledged that he had never heard of the Nicene Creed. Hilary became better informed about the Creed only during his exile in the East around 356 (Ulrich 1997:20). Upon his return from exile, Hilary became one of the prominent persons to introduce the Nicene creed and theology in the West. Ulrich opines that it took almost forty years (that is, well into the '60s of the fourth century), for Latin-speaking theologians to wade into the theological debates of the post-Nicene period. Prior to Hilary, Athanasius and Marcellus of Ancyra had taken refuge in the West after their depositions. While Marcellus was ousted from Ancyra for dogmatic reasons, Athanasius was exiled from Alexandria for ecclesiastical and political reasons (Ulrich 1997:16, 21).

In his declaration of orthodoxy before the Roman Synod in 340, Marcellus placed emphasis on the unity of the Trinity in his interpretation of the Nicene Creed. He argued against 'those who teach that the Son is a different hypostasis' while insisting simultaneously on the relation between the Father and the Son as being of 'one substance' (Ulrich 1997:18). Marcellus appeared to have succeeded in Rome on two grounds. On face value, Marcellus's version seemed plausible as the correct and orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. The reason is not all that far-fetched, since the Nicene creed at the time was not widely circulated in the western part of the empire. The second is the close similarity between the trinitarian conception of Marcellus and Tertullian, who had used the term 'una substantia' to describe the Trinity. Both Ulrich and Joseph O'Leary note in unison that Tertullian in his *Adversus Praxean*, written around AD 214, had described the trinitarian faith as a major distinctive stamp that distinguished Christianity from Judaism (Ulrich 1997:18; O'Leary 2014:240). Hence, through the use of skilful polemics against his enemies in the east, Marcellus portrayed Eastern Origenists as tainted with Arianism on account of their supposed doctrine of 'hypostases'. With trinitarian terminologies still very much unclear at their incipient, the West was most likely bought over in recalling an earlier third century heresy of 'three substances' (Ulrich 1997:18).

In some respects, the opposition of Athanasius to Arius's denial of the divinity of the Son unarguably heightened his extreme Logos-Sarx Christology. In reference to the Trinity, Athanasius's position was underpinned by his famous dictum: 'non tres dii, sed unus Deus' (do not say three, but one God) (cited in O'Leary 2014:229). It is not surprising, as Arwin van Wilgenburg indicates, that western theology is more affected by anti-Arian tendency to the extent that the West developed a strong anti-Arian stance (Wilgenburg 2010:326). It is equally not surprising that

the Athanasian Creed may have originated in the West. The position of Athanasius that ‘the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are indivisibly one, eternally co-inhering in each other ...’ (Meyer 2005:24), is amply reflected in the Athanasian creed. The opening words of that creed give credence to that assertion: ‘We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit ...’ (cited in Clark 1996:472).

Western trinitarian theology, after its tutelage under the shadow of Athanasius and Marcellus of Ancyra, can be said to have taken roots and acquired its distinctive characteristics during the patristic golden period through the works of Latin luminaries such as Marius Victorinus, Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo. Similar assertion can also be made about Eastern trinitarian theology, which carries the lasting seal of the Cappadocian Fathers. They conceived the Father within the Godhead as the unifying reference for the Son and the Spirit (Rostock 2010:323). They also made a clear distinction between unity and the ontological oneness of the three Divine Persons. Alongside other Greek Fathers such as John Chrysostom, the trinitarian theology of the Cappadocians occupies a prominent place in the Orthodox Church. As explicated by Nigel Rostock, John Zizioulas (one of the most influential contemporary Orthodox scholars), sustains the view that it was the Greek Fathers who correctly identified the unity of God within the person of the Father, rather than in the one *ousia* (Rostock 2010:323–324). Timothy Ware concludes: ‘According to the Greek Fathers of the fourth century, whom the Orthodox Church follows to this day, the Father is the sole and ground of unity in the Godhead’ (cited in Rostock 2010:324).

In the explication of Thomas Weinandy, the Cappadocians were the first to introduce the concept of ‘cause’ into the being of God, whereby ‘what causes God to be is the Person of the Father, not the one divine substance’ (Weinandy 2002b:409). However, they ‘did not fully grasp Athanasius’s insight into Nicaea’s homoousion doctrine’ and its metaphysical import, because their understanding of the Trinity was enunciated from an Origenist spectrum (Weinandy 2002b:410). Theirs is a conception of the Trinity that is linear, such that the Son and the Holy Spirit derive their divinity from the divine nature of the Father (Weinandy 2002b:410). On account of their lack of metaphysical acumen like Athanasius, the Cappadocians unwittingly impressed Platonic emanationism upon Orthodox trinitarian thought, which in the words of Weinandy ‘is present to this day’ (Weinandy 1995a:13). Nevertheless, it is worth acknowledging that it was the Cappadocians who thoroughly developed the concept of hypostasis. By so doing, they placed greater priority on the Divine

Persons over abstract divine nature (Meyer 2005:238). It can thus be safely deduced that while Middle and Neo-Platonism had an influence on the East's linear conception of the Trinity, Aristotelian epistemology played a similar role in shaping Western trinitarian theology (Weinandy 1995:10, 13–14). This divergence between East and West with regard to their respective trinitarian theologies was almost fully established long before the *filioque* controversy made its debut around the middle of the seventh century. It is most likely that the first case in reference to the *filioque* was mentioned between AD 645 and 646 in the *Letter to Marinus* by Maximus the Confessor, during the time of Pope Theodore I (AD642–649) (Siecienski 2015:10).

### 3. Mediaeval Trinitarian intuition

John Damascene is generally considered as having summed up the patristic trinitarian thought in a way that has become normative for the Eastern churches. Augustine of Hippo achieved a similar feat for the Latin West in its conception of the Trinity. His theology became intensified much later through the writings of Anselm of Canterbury (Kasper 1986:298), and through the optics of the mediaeval perception of theology as faith seeking 'scientific' understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum scientificum*) (O'Collins 2014:4). The intervention of Augustine in clarifying the mystery of the Trinity as well as key concepts and terminologies associated with the doctrine has remained indelible in the annals of Western theology. Among his lauded merits is his clear distinction between trinitarian identity and relations. According to Augustine, while the three Divine Persons are One at the level of essence and absolute perfection, they remain distinguished at the level of relations (Mondin 1996a:403). In other words, the identity of the Father is paternity, that of the Son is filiation, while that of the Spirit is spiration (passive donation between the Father and the Son) (Mondin 1996a:403–404).

Considered from the standpoint of Augustine, it simply means that the names of the three Divine Persons of the Trinity denote relations (Weinandy 2002b:412). Another insight of Augustine, as gleaned from *De Trinitate*, is the preferred analogy of the mind to describe the Trinity. In classical philosophy, the mind consists of three faculties: memory, intellect and will. Although all three are distinct in their various functions, they constitute one unique substance (Mondin 1996a:404; Drever 2007:237). Transposed to trinitarian theology, it becomes commonplace to '... find in Augustine such statements as: the Trinity is the one true God, or God is the Trinity' (cited in Kasper 1986:262). Another dimension of the Augustinian notion is a trinitarian theology rooted in a perception of the historical missions of the Son and the Spirit (O'Leary 2014:238). The

trinitarian missions go beyond *opera ad extra* since they also manifest the eternal processions of the Son and the Spirit in human history. In reference to the mission of the Son, Augustine writes in *De Trinitate* IV:29: 'Just as to be born is for the Son to be from the Father, so to be sent is for the Son to be known that he is from him' (cited in O'Leary 2014:237).

Although Augustinian 'essentialist' view was the dominant trinitarian perspective in the West during the Mediaeval era, it was, however, not the only perception or notion of the Trinity. There emerged on the mediaeval theological scene the 'personalist' tradition, particularly with the coming of the Mendicant orders, and more specifically, the Franciscan friars. According to Walter Kasper, the adoption of the 'personalist' notion of the Trinity predated the Franciscans, because someone like Hilary of Poitiers had already in the second half of the fourth century made use of it in his trinitarian theology (Kasper 1986:298). In the explication of Kasper, the Latin 'personalists' took as their own the same trinitarian concern of the Greek fathers which is summed up in the 'monarchy of the Father' (Kasper 1986:298). It gained prominence in the Middle Ages through the work of William of St Thierry, followed by Richard of St Victor who became its most important exponent. Richard of St. Victor was one of the influential authors who wrote one of the most important treatises on the Trinity between Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Another outstanding figure in the 'personalist' tradition was Alexander of Hales, who continued the trinitarian thought of Richard of St Victor. Alexander of Hales was a Franciscan friar who had considerable influence on another Franciscan confrere of his, in the person of St Bonaventure (1221–1274), who revered him as his spiritual master (Mondin 1996b:263).

As the initiator of the Franciscan theological school of thought, Alexander of Hales impressed upon it a sapiential/affective character which eventually became one of its distinctive marks. Other peculiar characters of the Franciscan school include illumination and recourse to exemplarism in explaining that knowledge is based on the perception of exemplars as existing in the mind of God. His disciple, Bonaventure, would later make use of '*per modum exemplaritatis*' to depict the Trinity as the archetype, the first and supreme model of all things (Mondin 1996b:303). As for the final objective of theology, Alexander understood it as having an affective-cum-contemplative rather than a speculative scope for its natural and final goal. In his theological treatise and exposition on the Trinity, Alexander comes up with an 'integral theology of love' by means of which he explains the dynamism of the divine processions of the Trinity. According to Alexander, he does not rely on intelligence to distinguish the double Trinitarian procession because intelligence may not produce another being. He argues that only love is given from one person to

another, and therefore, only love is the appropriate principle to explain the Trinity. In this vein, Alexander positioned himself as the continuator of the intuition of Richard of St Victor, who maintained that there is a plurality of subjects in the Supreme Love (Mondin 1996b:262–263).

As for Bonaventure, called the Seraphic Doctor in his own right as one of mediaeval great thinkers, his theology can be described as a profound meditation on the Trinity. He was one of the first mediaeval Latin theologians to employ the term ‘circumincessio’ in his trinitarian theology (Mondin 1996b:303). It is the Latin translation of the Greek ‘perichoresis’, used by the Greek fathers, notably by John Damascene to explain the mutual indwelling of the three divine Persons without mixture. It suggests that the unity of the Trinity lies in the fact that no one of the three Divine Persons can be thought of without the other two, since each of the three Divine Persons is co-present to one another. Bonaventure borrows from Augustine the contemplation of eleven ‘highest nobilities’ (*nobilitates*) of the divine being: life, sensitivity, intelligence, immortality, power, justice, goodness, incorruptibility, immutability, incorporeity and beatitude (Mondin 1996b:303). He reduced the *nobilitates* from eleven to three, namely: eternity, wisdom and beatitude. Bonaventure went further and finally reduced all three ‘highest nobilities’ to only one: wisdom or knowledge. In applying it to the Trinity, he identified the generating Mind as the Father, the generated Word as the Son, and Love as the Holy Spirit. In contrast to Augustine, Bonaventure depicts the Spirit as the active unifier in the act of love since he is the unitary knot between the Father and the Son (Mondin 1996b:303).

Mediaeval trinitarian thought reached its zenith in Thomas Aquinas. He possessed an uncommon ability for synthesis that enabled him to find an equilibrium between the various conceptions of the Trinity (Kasper 1986:298). The basic tenets of his trinitarian thoughts are found in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, the disputed questions in *De Potentia*, *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa Contra Gentes* (Iribarren 2002:295). His trinitarian theology rests on the analogy of intellection (knowing) and volition (willingness) in God and rational creatures. In Thomistic view, divine relations and processions are identical with the divine nature where paternity and filiation are understood to be relations in God (*in divinis*). As such: ‘Whatever is in God is His essence’ (cited in McDermott 2012:124). Similarly, ‘God’s understanding is His *esse*; hence the word, which proceeds from God insofar as He is understanding, proceeds from Him insofar as He is existing ...’ (cited in McDermott 2012:129). Aquinas takes for granted the Western concept of double processions in the Trinity. Considering it beyond question, he identifies two processions by opining thus: ‘In God (in *Deo*) there are only two who proceed (*procedentes*),

namely the Son and the Holy Spirit. Hence there are there (*ibi* [that is, in God]) only two processions' (cited in McDermott 2012:133).

In making a distinction between *De Deo Uno* (the one God) and *De Deo Trino* (the triune God), Aquinas makes room for the unity and diversity of the three Divine Persons (Letham 2002a:29). On the one hand, their relationships define their unique identities as ontological subjects or Persons, and on the other hand, they define their ontological unity as the one God. This is possible because the three Divine Persons subsist as who they are in relation to one another, for together they 'form a dynamic ontological communion of love' (Weinandy 2002b:413). Thomas's synthesis of the 'essentialist' and 'personalist' notions is shown in the insistence that the Divine Persons of the Trinity are subsistent relations. Within that order, paternity belongs to the Father as the unbegotten or ungenerated, filiation to the Son as the generated, and passive spiration to the Spirit in relation to the active spiration of the Father and the Son (Mondin 1996b:376–377). Aquinas conceives Trinitarian processions as occurring *per modum intellectus* and *per modum amoris* (O'Leary 2014:230). It can be assumed that by depicting the Spirit as the reciprocal Love and Gift between the Father and the Son, and as proceeding through the common volition of the Father and the Son, Aquinas seeks to blur the sharp edges of the somewhat abstract essentialist perspective of the Trinity. Like Augustine, he designates the Holy Spirit as the mutual Love or Gift shared and given by the Father and the Son (Weinandy 1995a:8–9). Perhaps it may also be reflective of the mediaeval rule of necessary, which implies that only the relations in the divine essence are necessary (Mondin 1996b:376; Hilmer 2003:131).

The mediaeval church appears equally to have sanctioned the two prevalent notions of the Trinity of the epoch. Quite instructive is the *tres res* trinitarian terminology of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. In the conciliar exposition, the *tres res* or *tres personae* are metaphysically constituted by *duo res*: one *res* as the relation, and the second *res* as the *essential* (Hilmer 2003:137). The immediate background to the council's *tres res* terminology was provided by the council's condemnation of 'Joachim of Fiore's conception of the divine unity as nothing more cohesive than a unity of collection among the persons' (Iribarren 2002:292). The conciliar trinitarian terminology was an endorsement of the thought of Peter Lombard, whom Joachim of Fiore had accused of introducing 'quaternarism' in the Trinity. According to Isabel Iribarren, 'quaternarism' implied a realist understanding of the four divine relations. In regard to 'quaternarism', to posit a real distinction between divine relations and the divine essence was construed as introducing a quaternity of four 'relative things' into the being of God. Therefore, by endorsing the trinitarian

theology of Peter Lombard, Lateran IV absolved him of 'quaternarism'. The council went further to pronounce a dogmatic statement on the Trinity (cited in Iribarren 2002:292):

... [T]here exists a certain supreme reality ... which truly is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the three persons together and each one of them separately. Therefore in God there is only a Trinity, not a quaternity, since each of the three persons is that reality. ... This reality neither begets nor is begotten nor proceeds.

Mediaeval trinitarian theological thoughts reached their apex in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council and at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274. Both councils formally sanctioned the teachings of mediaeval theologians which the Latin church judged as orthodox. In contemporary terms, this official sanctioning may be called 'theology from above'. They set the formula such as the proposition *tres res sunt una res* (Hilmer 2003:128), and also established the parameter and the general terms for the trinitarian discourse that remained operative in subsequent centuries. Although they provided a rich soil for the plurality of trinitarian reflections, they equally established the theological structures and trinitarian yardsticks or frames of reference by means of which the Western Church scrutinised trinitarian orthodoxies. It was through the instrumentality of those conciliar trinitarian norms that some mediaeval scholars such as Peter John Olivi, Meister Eckhart, John of Pouilly and the nominalist tradition of William of Ockham and John Duns Scotus were judged (Hilmer 2003:130; Iribarren 2002:290). Even at the initial stage of the Reformation, a leading figure such as Martin Luther did not entirely repudiate mediaeval trinitarian intuition and discourse. This is evident in this hymn by Luther: 'Dear Christians, one and all rejoice'. It was inspired by this scriptural verse: 'The Father has sent His Son as the Saviour of the world' (1 John 4:14). (Hilmer 2003:140).

Another aspect of mediaeval trinitarian theology is the *filioque* controversy that has caused the estrangement between Western and Eastern churches. The attempts and efforts that were made towards union at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 and the orchestrated *Letantur Coeli* (decree of union, 6 July 1439) at the Council of Florence proved incapable of healing the centuries-old division. Lyons II upheld the legitimacy of the addition on the following ground: the Spirit proceeds not from two principles but from the Father and the Son as one co-principle (Dulles 1995:32–33). The Council of Florence, for its part, duly recognised the Eastern and Western version of the creed as equivalent. It admitted the legitimacy of the two versions for use in the two respective churches.



Despite some musings about possible rapprochement, the Catholic Church in the West has retained the offending clause as an indispensable part of its understanding and profession of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. According to Avery Dulles, from the viewpoint of the Roman Catholic Church, it is reasonable to concede that after many centuries of its use, there is no doubt that *filioque* has attained in the church the status of an irreversible ecclesiastical dogma (Dulles 1995:35).

#### 4. From conceptualist to history-rooted

By and large, the constitutive elements of Catholic doctrine of the Trinity reached their present phase with the official approval of the church. The councils of the Latin Church and the popes drew upon the works of theologians whose insights and contributions were adjudged orthodox and attuned with the official creed. In the actual state of trinitarian theology, it is taken as beyond question that traditional understanding of the Trinity underscores that there are four relations in God which are paternity, filiation, active spiration and passive spiration. It equally acknowledges that the three Divine Persons of the Trinity are identical with one another in all things although they differ with regard to relations of origin. For instance, Fatherhood is not Sonship, in a similar manner that active and passive spirations are distinct and unique in themselves (Dulles 1995:36). Considered as *causa finita*, contemporary trinitarian theology in its diversity delves into the immanent and economic Trinity, social Trinitarianism and trinitarian missions. It also considers the question of how the Trinity may be viewed either through the conceptualist approach or the historical model of revelation. All these areas of concern are not only reflective of the evolution of events and change of scopes that have taken place overtime, but are also indicative of the quest for theological relevance or the concretisation of doctrines into real-life issues. In some ways, the focus of trinitarian theological concerns has increasingly moved away from metaphysics to anthropology, brought about particularly by the Enlightenment and its attention from above to below, that is, from God to the world. Instructive in this regard is the clarion call from Alexander Pope: 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of mankind is man' (cited in Letham 2002a:30).

The distinction between immanent and economic Trinity is one of the characteristics of contemporary discourse on the Trinity where attention has been increasingly focused on the historical approach to church doctrines. Within the same optic, human experience is understood as a privileged locus of revelation since it is considered as an inevitable medium through which divine self-manifestation takes place (O'Collins 2002:365). In the same frame of thought, the church's doctrine about the



Trinity is not conceived as the faithful transmission of revealed truth. In that respect, as John McDermott opines, ‘the church fathers had to elaborate a new vocabulary to deal with the mystery of the Triune God, and in various ecumenical councils they imposed a definite rule of faith upon the church’ (McDermott 2012:115). As for the terms *trinitas oeconomica* and *trinitas essentialis*, according to Christine Hilmer, they were first used by Johann Urlsperger within the context of transcendental philosophy in the late eighteenth century (Hilmer 2003:131). As borrowed terminologies, they were employed in trinitarian theology to denote two modern possibilities of trinitarian conceptualisations, namely: Kantian and Hegelian. In the first pole, that is the Kantian paradigm, it starts from the Divine Economy to immanent Trinity. On the opposite pole, the Hegelian paradigm explores logically and ontologically the unfolding of the of the immanent into the economic Trinity (Hilmer 2003:131). Although both paradigms still lurk in the background in trinitarian discourses, contemporary theologians seem to prefer to direct their focus more on the missions of the Trinity instead of inner-Trinitarian processions (McDermott 2012:113).

One way to gauge the evolution that took place in Catholic theology between the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century is to look at the progression from the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Both councils approached the Trinity quite differently. Vatican I tended towards being conceptualist in its understanding of the mystery of Trinity as part of the revealed truth of the Christian faith. It maintained the balance by insisting that the Trinity is not known only through supernatural revelation. This much is visible in its dogmatic constitution *Dei filius* (on the Catholic faith). Although the second part of the schema that was exclusively devoted to the Trinity, creation and exaltation never came up again for discussion owing to the abrupt suspension of the council, nevertheless, allusions to the oneness of God were quite evident. In its profession of faith, the council confessed God ‘as one, true and living ... he is one, unique, spiritual substance, entirely simple and unchangeable, distinct from the world in existence and essence ...’ (Denzinger 3001–3002). Aware of the thorny debate of the time on faith and reason, the council saw the Trinity as belonging to the truths of faith which it declared to be supernatural. It is, therefore, part of the ‘mysteries hidden in God which cannot be known unless divinely revealed’ and even so, not completely understood when revealed, ‘for divine mysteries by their very nature so exceed the created intellect ...’ (Denzinger 3015–3016).

In contrast, the pendulum of trinitarian thought appeared to have swung towards history and human experience at the Second Vatican Council. In its dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*,

the council accepts that the trinitarian faith is historically rooted in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. Human experience is understood as an important medium by means of which divine self-manifestation takes place (Denzinger 4202). This significant shift in Vatican II is an indication of the tension in Catholic theology particularly between Thomism and *Nouvelle Théologie* during the first half of the twentieth century. It may be described as a tension between 'Conclusion' or 'Denzinger theology' and theological *Ressourcement* (Schelkens et al 2013:122–123). As a protest to a theology that owed its existence to a single mediaeval theologian, *Nouvelle théologie* was resolved to return to the historical roots of Christian theology. It accorded a prominent place to the Bible, liturgy and the Church Fathers. Its outstanding exponents included Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Henri-Marie Féret, Jean Danielou and Henri de Lubac. Its momentum was checkmated by Pope Pius XII in 1950 with the encyclical *Humani Generis*. *Nouvelle théologie*, however, appeared to have survived through the works of Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Piet Schoonenburg and Karl Rahner (Schelkens et al 2013:125–126).

Generally, one of the most visible aspects of Catholic theology in the twentieth century is the greater appreciation of historical development of doctrine and patristic studies. As a result, there has been a rediscovery of the Eastern Church Fathers by Catholic theologians, which means that western theology has benefited immensely in broadening its theological viewpoints. For this reason, Weinandy has observed, western theology has come to claim as its own the whole of Christian theological tradition that embraces the East and West (Weinandy 2002b:413). Since both patristic and scholastic theology seemed to have focused much attention on the divinity of Christ in relation to the Trinity, twentieth theologians such as Rahner and Balthasar gave more attention on his humanity so that Christology can be depicted as the key to unlock their trinitarian thoughts. In the estimation of Rahner, Christology provides the centre of the Christian mystery, and as such, it is within the context of Rahner's trinitarian theology that his Christology takes its definitive contours (McDermott 1986:106). Similar supposition is also true of Balthasar who, on the basis of his Christology, proposes a new interpretation of the Trinity. In Balthasar's view, the Father is the source of life and his hypostasis as Father consists in the total giving of himself to the Son who, in turn, responds totally and unreservedly, and the Holy Spirit is identified as the very fecundity of divine love in the Trinity (Mondin 1996c:521, 554).

Connected with the trends towards humanising a too abstract trinitarian discourse is social trinitarian theology in the footsteps of Jürgen Moltman, Balthasar, John Zizioulas and Sergii Bulgakov. Social trinitarian theologians equally make appeal to Rahner's maxim: 'the economic

Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa' (O'Leary 2014:230–234). While not discarding the trinitarian sobriety of the Church Fathers and the councils, social Trinitarianism of the decades of the 1980s and 1990s exerted much energy and concentration on the inner life of the Trinity and the relevance of God's action in human history. One of the criticisms against social Trinitarianism is its overt reliance on Hegelianism. In the critical summation of Joseph O'Leary, with reference to social Trinitarianism, he considers it an inadequate tool to expatiate upon the Trinity as the very core doctrine of the Christian faith. In the judgment of O'Leary: 'The ambition to build the tower of metaphysical theology higher than Aquinas, with the aid of Hegel and Schelling, is misguided; the sole function of the doctrine, as a *Schutzlehre* (Brunner), is to preserve the biblical experience of God as Trinity' (O'Leary 2014:239).

## 5. Conclusion

In keeping with the Latin axiom *lex credendi, lex orandi*, the Western Church considers the liturgy as a fundamental expression of the Christian faith. It is one of the major barometers to measure the orthodoxy of trinitarian theological discourse since the 'law of prayer determines the law of belief'. The liturgy is the source of trinitarian theology because it provided the earliest setting for the Christian community to express and live its faith in the Trinity. It has continued to play that role for Western and Eastern churches that are creedal churches, especially when they gather 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. Evidently, the Trinity has also been the subject of fierce theological debates and disputes as well as heightened tensions and critical reflections.

The overall aim of this excursus has been to make as concisely as possible a historical exposé of trinitarian theological discourse from the perspective of Catholic tradition and heritage. Given the vastness of the trinitarian doctrine in the Christian argot, this article has limited its focus on the Trinity as one of the basic tenets of the apostolic faith to which both the western and eastern churches subscribe. However, by considering the trinitarian thoughts of Latin theologians, particularly, in the mediaeval era, the article has identified distinctive aspects of Catholic trinitarian theology in terms of emphasis and nuances. This is done in the realisation of the fact that the Church Fathers in both East and West, regardless of the differences imposed on them by language, cultural and philosophical worldviews, never thought of themselves as expounding a totally different trinitarian theology in the strict sense of the term.

## The Trinity in the Reformed Tradition

Dirk J Smit

### 1. A specific reformed perspective?

Did the doctrine of the Trinity have any special significance for the early figures in the Reformed tradition – and for their successors? Is it possible to distinguish specific Reformed perspectives regarding the doctrine of the Trinity? Should it be seen as coincidental that several thinkers belonging to the Reformed family so very deliberately developed fully trinitarian theologies during the twentieth century? These are difficult questions to respond to.

It speaks for itself that the early Reformed theologians did not invent the doctrine, but received it from the tradition since the early church – yet did they simply take it over uncritically, without their own adaptations, emphases, and perhaps ignoring aspects about which they were not so enthusiastic? It also speaks for itself that Reformed theologians from the twentieth century and today cannot claim a renewed interest in the doctrine only for themselves, since they obviously share in and depend on what has often been described as an ecumenical rediscovery, a renaissance or a revival of trinitarian faith<sup>1</sup> – yet, is there any relief to be discerned in this ecumenical rediscovery, any confessional characteristics, any preferences and emphases that belong to different confessional communities, and particularly to the Reformed family, or does everyone appropriate the doctrine in exactly the same way, with the same questions and with the same uses?

What makes it even more difficult to answer these questions in the case of the Reformed family is the characteristically Reformed absence of any representative voice, any authoritative office or body, any corpus of teaching or teachers who speak on behalf of the tradition. Where would one find ‘the’ Reformed perspective? Since the earliest days, the answers to these questions were difficult and contested. Not even

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1 See, for example, the informative overviews by Wainwright 1998; Van den Brink 2003; see also Karkkainen.

Calvin could be regarded as speaking for the whole tradition, no single body of confessional documents is accepted by anyone, no authoritative meeting speaks for the family – so, how will one be able to say whether there are specific Reformed perspectives? Whenever one discerns some core perspective, there will immediately be Reformed figures with other voices too, which then raises the question whether the perspective should be broadened to include them too, or whether they should be excluded, as precisely *not* being authentically Reformed.

With regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, these are very pertinent questions, appearing regularly in the discussions – should Reformed Orthodoxy, Schleiermacher, Berkhof, and Moltmann (and many others) – for example – be regarded as exceptions, as un-Reformed regarding their views on the Trinity, or do their views precisely show that any so-called Reformed perspective is too narrow and therefore misleading? The temptations of a circular argument obviously loom large, regarding as Reformed only that which has already been decided on beforehand.

Keeping these difficulties and dangers in mind, it may perhaps be possible to argue that at least *five motivi* appear so regularly in Reformed thought – already in Calvin and again, albeit in diverse and complex ways, in well-known twentieth century Reformed theologians – that they may perhaps be regarded as together representing a specific Reformed perspective.

Perhaps such a case may be made by showing their roots in Calvin's own work and then demonstrating their presence and function in a variety of recent Reformed theological projects. Any attempt to show 'roots in Calvin's own work' is, of course, highly contested. For the last century, different schools of Reformed faith and tradition have appealed to Calvin as their 'roots', often with extremely diverse and even conflicting interpretations of Calvin. South African theology has been a prime example of these conflicts of interpretation, but it is also true of the broader family, and definitely the case within Calvin scholarship. The year of commemoration of his birth in 2009 will again show these controversies. This is also true regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. Did Barth, for example, follow Calvin in his epoch-making return to the doctrine of the Trinity – or precisely not? Is it legitimate to read Calvin through the eyes of Barth and therefore also of the trinitarian renaissance – or precisely not?<sup>2</sup>

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2 These debates are today often framed in terms of Richard A. Muller's strong thesis that Calvin should not be 'accommodated' to contemporary viewpoints and needs, but should be studied within his historical context, for example, in his *The Unaccommodated Calvin*.

## 2. Biblical grammar

In the case of Calvin, a detailed monograph on the doctrine of the Trinity has been published during the last years, which finally makes it possible to make claims backed by painstaking scholarship. It is the comprehensive study by Arie Baars called *Om Gods Verhevenheid en Zijn Nabijheid. De Drie-Eenheid bij Calvijn*.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it is fair to say that the first and most fundamental characteristic of Calvin's treatment of the doctrine is found in his particular way of seeing the doctrine as biblical or scriptural. Van den Brink has shown that one of the major criticisms against this doctrine – certainly in the Netherlands, even until and including Berkhof – had for a long time been the feeling that the early Protestant theologians should have been more consistent with their notion of the *sofa scriptura*, and that they should have rid themselves also of the legacy of the un-scriptural terminology and content of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>4</sup> One could argue that for Calvin exactly the opposite was the case. This doctrine provided

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*Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*, 2000. This way of framing the issue, however, already shows the problems. It is, of course, necessary for scholarship to understand Calvin as figure of his time, and not to misuse him by making him speak with a contemporary voice. At the same time, if a living tradition is indeed 'a historically extended, socially embodied argument about the goods that constitute that tradition' (in Alasdair MacIntyre's words), and if Calvin indeed provides 'the foundation' or at least some 'roots' for a living Reformed tradition, then it is certainly both legitimate and necessary that contemporary Reformed theology engages with Calvin about its present theological task, and not merely repeats what he said as product of his own historical context.

3 Baars 2004. In a very helpful introduction, he situates Calvin within the contemporary reflection on the Trinity and points to key questions of interpretation. He then minutely follows the development of Calvin's views on the Trinity in the different editions of the *Institutes*, before he focuses on some comparative literature, first Calvin's own commentaries, sermons, and other writings, and then the positions of theologians from the early church who had an influence on Calvin, as well as some of his contemporaries. In an important systematic interpretation, he paints the 'basic structures' of Calvin's views, and then he builds 'bridges' towards contemporary discussions and questions. He claims that this is the first real in-depth study of Calvin's views of the Trinity, and he certainly provides present scholarship with extremely helpful detail and overview. Baars later also wrote a helpful brief discussion of the theme called 'Triniteit' in the equally comprehensive and helpful *Selderhuis 2008* (an English translation of which is in preparation).

4 Van den Brink 2003:211.

the only and unavoidable way of thinking and speaking, according to the message of scripture.

In terminology that many others have also often used, the doctrine provides believers with a 'structure' or 'framework'<sup>5</sup> or with 'biblical grammar', with the only way to think Old and New Testament together, and to speak of the *one* God of both Testaments.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean quoting disparate texts in the first place as proof texts, but rather discerning a pattern, a scope, an underlying reality within scripture.<sup>7</sup>

In his very instructive introduction to a collection of key texts from history, *Der lebendige Gott. Texte zur Trinitätslehre*, Ernstpeter Maurer – not without very good reason – discusses Calvin as the very first contribution, under the theme 'The doctrine of the Trinity: Rule for Biblical Speech about God'.<sup>8</sup> In short, Calvin does not merely take over the doctrine of the Trinity because it is part of the tradition of the church. On the contrary, he is clearly critical of many of the terms that are used, and

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5 There have been major scholarly debates about the structure of the *Institutes*, including the question whether it should be seen as a consciously trinitarian structure, or not. See, for example, the informative studies by Breukelman 2003; Baars, 2004; Partee 2008). Perhaps it is best to say that the overall structure is probably not trinitarian, although the doctrine of the Trinity is very much present and important (cf Baars 2004:637).

6 Again, this approach is certainly not exclusive to Reformed theologians. There are, for example, many similarities with the kind of argument made by David S. Yeago in his much discussed essay 'The New Testament and the Nicene dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis' 1994.

7 Baars, 'Triniteit,' 279 explains in detail that and how Calvin himself already used scripture in new ways in order to explain the doctrine. He describes Calvin's motive as 'biblical-theological' in nature and comments that Calvin wants to start his thinking from the Bible, but that this does not imply a biblicist rejection of the classical trinitarian terminology. According to Calvin, it is fully legitimate to clarify the message of scripture by means of extra-biblical concepts and dogmatic formulae.

8 Ernstpeter Maurer, 'Die Trinitätslehre: Regel für das biblische Reden von Gott,' in *Der lebendige Gott. Texte zur Trinitätslehre* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1999), 11–73. Together with Calvin, he also treats Basil of Caesarea and Karl Barth under this theme; in the case of Barth he speaks about God's revelation as the root of the doctrine of the Trinity, 51–73. See also Maurer, 'Grammatik des biblischen Redens von Gott. Grundlinien der Trinitätslehre Karl Barths,' *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 28 (1998), 113–130.



carefully considers, qualifies, critiques, and even rejects some of them. He seems to prefer, for example, the terms Source, Wisdom, and Power.<sup>9</sup>

He is of the opinion that the doctrine provides the only way to understand, think about, and speak about the God of the Bible. In that regard, he again does not simply use all the biblical proof texts that have become standard in the history of the church, but focuses only on such pericopes that show, for example, the unity of the God of the Old and the New Testaments and the divinity of both the Son and the Spirit.

This could perhaps be seen as a *first* characteristic of Reformed trinitarian thought, expressed in more contemporary words; namely, that the doctrine is seen as providing the necessary ‘grammar’ to speak about the message of the scriptures.

### 3. Living God

What is this message of the scriptures? It is not without good reason that Maurer calls his study *Der lebendige Gott. Texte zur Trinitätslehre*, or that Michael Welker and Miroslav Volf call the German *Festschrift* for Jurgen Moltmann’s eightieth birthday, *Der lebendige Gott als Trinität*, and the accompanying English volume, *God’s Life in Trinity*.<sup>10</sup>

The South African Reformed theologian Jaap Durand similarly called his work on the doctrine of God *Die lewende God*, and argued that this conviction had been at the heart of the trinitarian renaissance

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9 This is, of course, a typical Reformed intuition, that the tradition in itself, including all the terms, is not in itself authoritative, but subject to critical consideration and rejection, if necessary. It is only because the scriptures make some distinctions that these should be considered necessary and useful. ‘I am not sure whether it is expedient to borrow analogies from human affairs to express the nature of this distinction. The ancient fathers sometimes do so, but they at the same time admit, that what they bring forward as analogous is very widely different. And hence it is that I have a great dread of anything like presumption here, less some rash saying may furnish an occasion of calumny to the malicious, or of delusion to the unlearned. It were unbecoming, however, to say nothing of a distinction which we observe that the Scriptures have pointed out. This distinction is, that to the Father is attributed the beginning of action, the fountain and source of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and arrangement in action, while the energy and efficacy of action is assigned to the Spirit,’ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), in the translation of Beveridge, Book 1/13.18. For discussion, see Baars, *Verhevenheid en Nabijheid* 661–669.

10 Michael Welker & Miroslav Volf (eds.), *Der lebendige Gott als Trinität. Jurgen Moltmann zum 80. Geburtstag* (Giitersloh: Giitersloher Verlagshaus, 2006); Miroslav Volf & Michael Welker (eds.), *God’s Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

in the last half century and longer, but also at the heart of the origins of Reformed theology – before it was, to a large extent, lost, for example, in Reformed scholasticism and orthodoxy and rejected, for example, in the dominant deist and theist religious atmosphere continuing into the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

Broadly speaking, this biblical grammar makes it possible to speak of the God of the scriptures as the living God, involved in history, the God of the covenant and of covenantal faithfulness. Maurer makes the point well by saying that in this perspective, trinitarian faith is the attempt ‘to reflect on (*nachzudenken*) the living unity of God’.

*Christian faith answers the question ‘Who is God?’ with a history. Because God is living, this history continues to be exciting and to take surprising turns again and again. It comprises many individual histories, since it is concerned with the encounter of God with human beings in very different situations. Nevertheless, the many histories form a unity: God’s presence in Jesus Christ shows humanity that God is reliable and keeps faithful to them – even when they alienate from God and rebel against God. The differentiated unity of God, then, is the starting point of the unfolding of the doctrine of the Trinity. 12*

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11 See J.J.F. (Jaap) Durand, *Die Lewende God* (1976), as well as his *The Many Faces of God* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007), in which he tells Calvin’s story under the rubric ‘Calvin’s Reliable God,’ 145–156. For the background of these accounts, already see his *Heilsgeschiedenis en die dialektiek van syn en denke: Strukturele verbindingslyne tussen Thomas Aquinas en die teologie sedert die Auklaring* (ongepubliseerde doktrale verhandeling, Stellenbosch, 1973). For an interesting account, also see William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence. How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), especially the section on ‘The Marginalization of the Trinity,’ 164–180.

12 Maurer, *Der lebendige Gott*, 9. Christlicher Glaube antwortet auf die Frage ‘Wer ist Gott?’ mit einer Geschichte. ‘Weil Gott lebendig ist, bleibt diese Geschichte spannend und nimmt immer wieder überraschende Wendungen. Sie umgreift: viele einzelne Geschichten, denn es geht um die Begegnung Gottes mit den Menschen in ganz unterschiedlichen Situationen. Und doch bilden die vielen Geschichten eine Einheit: Gottes Gegenwart in Jesus Christus zeigt den Menschen, daß Gott verlässlich ist und ihnen treu bleibt – auch wenn sie sich von Gott entfernen und gegen Gott rebellieren. Die differenzierte Einheit Gottes: hier liegt der Ansatzpunkt für die Entfaltung der Trinitätslehre.’

This sounds very similar to the descriptions often given of Barth's views on the Trinity, and it may indeed be that Barth's views form the background of the way Maurer reads the trinitarian tradition, including Calvin.<sup>13</sup>

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- 13 An instructive illustration of such a reading of Barth is, for example, to be found in William Stacy Johnson's discussion of 'The Mystery of the Triune God' in his *The Mystery of God. Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 1997), 43–66. 'In contrast to these classical abstractions, Barth conceived God as dynamic and relational in character. In doubtless one of his simplest and yet most breathtaking analytical insights, Barth proclaimed that God is one whose very being (or character) is expressed in act... If it is true that in Jesus Christ knowledge of God is real and possible... then we need to construct a way of conceiving God that makes sense of this conviction... If one accepts a premise that God has been revealed in Jesus Christ, then a constructive, second-order explanatory statement must also be adopted: namely, God's being (which is eternal) must be able to express itself ever anew (in history) in God's act. Or to put it the other way around, God is in God's historic revelation as God is in God's self-being eternally. God reproduces God's being in the world as a history.' Johnson then argues that it might help to translate this rather abstract language of 'being' into the language of character. According to him, this would mean that Barth is saying that, '(Although it is a mystery and a wonder, the very character of God has been replicated and displayed in the suffering character of this finite human being, Jesus of Nazareth. God is nothing other than gracious in Jesus Christ. Nor is there some different and ungracious divine figure lurking in the shadows. God is as Jesus is; God acts as Jesus acts.' According to him, this implies that, emphasizing the act' of God, Barth is shifting 'the emphasis away from the so-called 'immanent Trinity' and towards the so-called 'economic Trinity'... Instead of an abstract, reified 'Trinity,' Barth often spoke of God's *Dreieinigkeit*, which means 'triunity' or 'threefoldness', he says. 'This does not mean there is no 'subject' in the act of revelation. But only through the act of this subject in the economy of salvation can we learn who this subject – God – is. In other words, God is the acting 'subject' of every sentence in the divine story, Only 'in act' can the identity of this Subject be known. 'In act' this particular Subject is always reliable and worth trusting... To put it plainly, 'God is not a transcendent being. From all eternity (God) has determined to turn to humanity' This 'turning' toward humanity is not something statically 'present,' but it is enacted in the dramatic unfolding of a story. It is a story of a God whose own life and character, although an unfathomable mystery, are confessed to have become embodied in the life and death of Jesus Christ... This remarkable story, we must hasten to add, is not yet consummated but is still working itself out toward a distant finale. Through the efficacy of the Spirit, God's story is still being enacted in the power of the risen Christ... We can understand the entire Barthian project as one of thinking through this 'identity' as triune mystery,' he claims (44–47).

The question of who God is can be answered only – according to this perspective – by retelling the story (or history) of the *one* God of the Old and New Testaments as *one* story, with all its complex internal differences, tensions, conflicts, and surprises, and by reflecting on the fidelity and covenantal trustworthiness present right through this one story, and by speaking about God in these terms, and only in these terms, in spite of all the conceptual difficulties this may raise.<sup>14</sup>

From this perspective, therefore, the trinitarian biblical grammar functions as rejection of idle speculation about God, and as critique of what is called idolatry, creating our own images and notions of God, that we then proclaim, worship and serve. On occasion, Calvin could even declare that this is the real usefulness of this doctrine and the main reason still to retain the un-scriptural philosophical terminology of the classical formulations.<sup>15</sup> At stake is the question of *who* God is –

14 According to Calvin, whether a 'god' exists (*quid sit Deus*) is not nearly as important a question as what *kind* of God exists (*qualis sit Deus*); important is not abstract speculation into God's 'essence,' but sure and faithful knowledge of God's grace, *Institutes* I/2; III/2.

15 It is very instructive that, in the last edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin begins his discussion of the doctrine of God with a treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity, under the rubric 'The Unity of the Divine Essence in Three Persons.' This differs from the earlier versions, and demonstrates his growing conviction that these terms and forms of thought, relative as they may be as human constructs, are indeed helpful and necessary to speak the biblical grammar (Book 1/13). This section is, however, very interestingly preceded by sections on 'The Principles of Piety Subverted by Fanatics' (in which he argues that, in order to know God, 'we must give diligent heed to the reading and hearing of Scripture,' Book 1/9), on 'The True God opposed to Heathen Gods' (in which he attempts to show that 'in Scripture the Lord represents himself in the same character in which we have already seen that he is delineated in his works,' Book 1/10), on 'The g73

Impiety of Visible Forms of God' (in which he critiques 'the setting up of idols as defection from the True God,' where he makes his well-known argument that 'the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols,' Book 1/11); and on 'God Distinguished from Idols for Effective Worship' (in which he warns that God may be robbed of honor and worship may be violated, Book 1/12). In other words, when he comes to the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, the rhetorical use is very much regulative, it serves to identify the true God from religious fanaticism and impious idolatry and worship.

Janet Martin Soskice, in 'Trinity and Feminism,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 135–150, comments, referring to Calvin's 'ferreting out the heretics' by using this doctrine, that 'it cannot be doubted that feminist theology in its reformist branch is often claiming to do precisely that – challenging idolatrous pictures of God,' and she asks

or more precisely, whether God is acknowledged as the living God of the scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

This also explains why there had been a remarkable lack of interest in the classical discussions of the immanent Trinity in these Reformed circles, already since Calvin. The emphasis is obviously on the activities of the one, living God – undivided, although to be distinguished;<sup>17</sup> rich, complex, full of surprises, yet always faithful to the promises and according to character;<sup>18</sup> full of grace, goodness, and mercy, although with many faces and forms.<sup>19</sup> The classical terminology is difficult, confusing, and not necessarily the best to be used, according to Calvin.<sup>20</sup> Even his appreciation for Orthodox theologians does not lead him into extensive discussions of the immanent Trinity,<sup>21</sup> which is also true of

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- ‘Might the doctrine of the Trinity then, in our own time and with our own theological questions, serve the same useful regulative
- 16 On the knowledge of God in this version of the Reformed tradition, see for example Cornells van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror. John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); also James B. Krohn, *Knowing the Triune God. Trinity and Certitude in the Theology of John Calvin* (Stellenbosch: Unpublished doctoral dissertation, 2002).
- 17 This again causes heated debates among Reformed theologians, with some who want to emphasize the unity of the divine actions more, some who stress the difference between the acts of the one God.
- 18 See, for example, Peter Opitz, *Calvins theologische Hermeneutik* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1994), especially ‘Die trinitarische Verankerung des Wortes Gottes als doctrina,’ 154–180.
- 19 Durand, *Lewende God*, speaks of ‘paradigms of radical grace’ to indicate that the grace of God is manifested in many different ways; for an instructive depiction of the many faces of God’s grace according to Calvin, see also Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).
- 20 Baars can therefore conclude that, although ‘the doctrine of the Trinity forms the positive heart of Calvin’s doctrine of God,’ he ‘does not systematically discuss themes like: the Essence and the attributes of God,’ *Verhevenheid en Nabijheid* 703. For the detail, see 381–464.
- 21 For an extensive discussion of Calvins relationship to Gregory of Nazianzus, see Baars, *Verhevenheid en Nabijheid*, 466–480. The influential Scottish Reformed theologian Thomas F. Torrance argued that Calvins doctrine of the Trinity shows remarkable parallels with the concept of Gregory and that he was influenced by him. In several publications and reports for ecumenical meetings and dialogues, Torrance developed one of the important trajectories of a Reformed view of the doctrine in deep appreciation for the Orthodox tradition; see for example his *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1988), and his *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1996); as well as the 1991 *Agreed Statement on the Holy Trinity between the Orthodox Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, in which he played a major role. Torrance sees

his appreciation of Augustine.<sup>22</sup> He deliberately does not use the classical biblical quotations to explain the generation of the Son and the Spirit.<sup>23</sup> He seldom mentions the *filioque* and only in passing, and the

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Calvin's most important contribution to the doctrine in his concept of manifold interpenetrating personal relations or subsistences within the one indivisible Godhead. Still, Baars is of the opinion that Calvin has at the most undergone some indirect influence of Gregory, and finds Torrance's interpretation of Calvin 'somewhat controversial' (j'nogal aanvechtbaar'), 660.

- 22 Again, Calvin's relation to Augustine regarding the doctrine of the Trinity is controversial and disputed. According to Baars's detailed investigation, *Verhevenheid en Nabijheid*, 480–540, Calvin rejects Augustine's allegorical exegesis and his speculative approach to the trinitarian doctrine, he differs from Augustine's understanding of 'Person' as an inner-trinitarian relationship, he rejects Augustine's search for traces of the Trinity, and he avoids speaking of the Trinity in his sermons, unlike Augustine. Most significantly, perhaps, is the fact that Augustine strongly stresses the unity of God, while Calvin puts more emphasis on the individuality of the Father, on the Son, and on the Spirit. This last aspect has been especially controversial regarding the positions of both Calvin and Augustine.

In this regard, the English Reformed theologian Colin Gunton has been particularly productive, also developing one of the important trajectories of a Reformed view of the doctrine in several studies, including, for example, his *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), *The One, the Three and the Many. God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), *The Triune Creator* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), and *The Christian Faith. An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). It is no surprise that the Festschrift which he edited for his own supervisor, Robert Jenson, was called *Trinity, Time, and Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), nor that the Festschrift dedicated to him by his own students, edited by Paul Louis Metzger, was called *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2005). In this last collection, a chapter from Gunton's *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), was included, called 'The Relevance of the "Eternal" Trinity'.

Gunton was particularly critical of Augustine and his impact on Western theology, and sought to recover also for the Reformed tradition a renewed interest in the importance of the immanent Trinity and of reflection on the attributes of God, among others by showing a preference for the Cappadocians, especially Basil of Caesarea, with a strong emphasis on a relational view of God and the divine being as essentially shared communion of the three persons, although in his case very consciously based on the economy of salvation, in Reformed fashion.

- 23 Calvin seldom uses the traditional terminology that the Father is unbegotten, that the Son is generated by the Father and that the Spirit proceeds from the Father (and the Son). Instead, he prefers to speak of



controversy clearly does not play an important role in his thought.<sup>24</sup> He is not interested in the search for any *vestigia trinitatis* that would help to make rational sense of the triune figure of thought. He is not concerned with theoretical discussions of unity and plurality.<sup>25</sup>

This may be a *second* characteristic of Reformed trinitarian thought; namely, that its interest lies elsewhere than the inner-trinitarian discussions of the early church, that the biblical grammar leads (them) to a different kind of trinitarian language; namely, confessing the actions of the *living* God.

#### 4. Trinitarian spread

For this perspective – reflecting on the rich biblical account of the work of the one living God – it becomes typical to speak about most Christian convictions (some would perhaps say ‘doctrines’)<sup>26</sup> in a rich and complex, trinitarian way.

Whether one speaks about the knowledge of God, about creation, about being, about time, about human beings, about salvation, about sin

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the Father as Source, the Son as Wisdom, and the Spirit as Power, see Baars *Verhevenheid en Nabijheid*, 637–678.

24 Ibid, 308–330, 666–669, 693–694.

25 For a critical discussion of modernity in this regard, and its impact on contemporary trinitarian thought, see Gunton *The One, the Three and the Many. God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

26 It is of course a controversial issue within Reformed theology whether it is helpful to speak of doctrines in the plural, as if it is possible to summarise the content of the Christian faith in a plurality of formulations; see, for example, Barth’s discussion in *Church Dogmatics* 1/1–, 304–309; also Hendrikus Berkhof’s *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 32–33. It is sometimes said – in line with the trinitarian grammar of trust in the one living God – that there is in fact only one doctrine, and it is often pointed out that *doctrina* for Calvin was synonymous to the preaching of the living Word; see Opitz, *Calvins theologische Hermeneutik*, 154–180; for a detailed doctoral study of the many different uses of *doctrina* in Calvin, see Victor E. d’ Assonville, *Der Begriff ‘doctrina’ bei Johannes Calvin – eine theologische Analyse* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2001). For a careful and instructive comparison between Luther and Calvin in this regard, precisely concerning the question how the Reformation saw the relationship between the intrinsic unity of the canonical truth of salvation and the extrinsic plurality of Scriptural dogmata,<sup>7</sup> see Hendrik W. Rossouw, *Klaarheid en Interpretasie* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Campen, 1963), especially 190–201, but in the larger context of 166–270; as well as his essay on ‘Doksologie, ortodoksie en ekumene,’ in Jan T. Bakker et al. (eds.), *Septuagésimo Anno. Theologische Opstellen aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. G. C. Berkouiver* (Kok: Kämpen, 1973), 203–212.



and suffering, about election, about the church, about baptism, about the Lord's Supper, about eschatology, about the Christian life, about discipleship and ethics, about calling, about hermeneutics, about love, yes, about Jesus Christ, about his cross, his resurrection and his threefold office, as well as about the Spirit, about worship and liturgy, about piety and spirituality, about prayer – a trinitarian account always seems to help to speak in more differentiated ways about the rich and complex, dynamic and surprising ways of the biblical account. Contemporary examples of all of these abound in theological literature.

Perhaps this should be regarded as the most far-reaching impact and lasting contribution for the trinitarian revival of Karl Barth's well-known move to begin the *Church Dogmatics* with the doctrine of the Trinity?<sup>27</sup> One major practical consequence has been that Reformed treatments of the last few decades of all these themes, and many more, have typically often followed a 'trinitarian spread' (in Dutch, a *trinitarische spreiding*, in the famous expression of Noordmans,<sup>28</sup> but with the same

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27 The opinions, of course, differ about the question whether in Barths own work this move remained too formal, built on a somewhat abstract notion of revelation, rather than on the rich content of the scriptures themselves. Some argue that it was too philosophical and theoretical, especially in the prolegomena itself, while others point to the further volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* to argue that Barth indeed followed the biblical grammar and spoke in rich and complex biblical detail about many doctrines, including of course the extensive sections of theological exegesis in small print.

28 In his exposition of Sundays 7–22 of the Heidelberg Catechism (called *Het Koninkrijk der Hemelen*, and available in reprint in his *Verzamelde Werken 2*, Kämpen: Kok, 1979:433–551), Oepke Noordmans uses the expression 'trinitarische spreiding' when discussing Sunday 7 (on the threefold division of the creed). In a very interesting way, he explains the notion by saying that believers often ask what Jesus would do, but that it is also necessary to ask what following the Father would mean and what the Holy Spirit would do. Only when asking these three questions together may a more adequate response be forthcoming.

In his very creative 'guideline for religious speeches,' in the form of a trinitarian discussion of the credo, called *Herschepping*, (original 1934, available in reprint in *Verzamelde Werken 2*, Kämpen: Kok, 1979, 214–322), he wrote about the doctrine of the Trinity under the heading 'There is plurality in God.' Here he argues that although God is one, there was a Word with God, and that Word came into the world – as a result of which the unity of God is broken. According to the gospel, God can even act in ever different ways. When speaking is not enough, God comes to us; when coming is not enough, He comforts us. In this way God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Spirit throughout the Bible. In fact, anyone who opens the Bible according to Noordmans sees its threefold structure: the Old Testament, the gospels, and Acts with the

spirit also to be found in Van Ruler).<sup>29</sup> Whatever the question, it seems that the biblical grammar calls for a threefold response.

The essay by Welker dedicated to Moltmann could perhaps serve as a representative illustration, also because it is – according to its own subtitle – an attempt to develop a doctrine of the Trinity with biblical orientation.<sup>30</sup> He takes his point of departure in contemporary experiences of disaster, suffering and evil, and asks how it is possible to speak of God and life in the face of these realities. In his own words, only a complex trinitarian response based on the dynamic biblical account could show the way.

Therefore, he first discusses God as Creator by showing the ambivalence and ultimate lack of comfort of any ‘natural’ creation theology (appealing mainly to Calvin); he then deals with the self-revelation of the saving God in the crucified and resurrected Christ (in critical dialogue with Moltmann himself); and he finally introduces the care for and salvation of creation in the power of the Holy Spirit (engaging with natural scientists, such as John Polkinghorne). The crucial point is that it is only through this complex trinitarian way of the scriptures that faith can speak about these experiences of disaster, since any partial answer would remain inadequate and misleading.

In this way, Welker demonstrates a *third* characteristic of Reformed trinitarian thought, often appealing directly to Calvin himself; namely, the importance of a *trinitarian spread* in speaking the language of faith.<sup>31</sup>

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letters. This plurality of God – or ‘openness of God’ as Noordmans has it – determines the wealth and abundance of Christian preaching and should be tangible in every sermon (223).

29 In similar creative and imaginative fashion, Arnold Albert van Ruler also developed a remarkably trinitarian theology, over many years and in complex ways; see for example his posthumously published essay ‘De noodzakelijkheid van een trinitarische theologie,’ in his volume of essays *Verwachting en voltooiing – een bundel theologische opstellen en voordrachten* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1978), 9–28; a trinitarian approach discussed in great detail in the doctoral dissertation by Christo Lombard, *Adama, Thora en Dogma (Aardse lewe, Skrif en Dogma)* by Van Ruler (Bellville: University of the Western Cape, unpublished dissertation, 1996). Between the work of Noordmans and Van Ruler there are important different emphases to discern, although they both represent influential voices within twentieth century Reformed thought on the doctrine of the Trinity.

30 Welker, ‘Der erhaltende, rettende und erhebende Gott. Zu einer biblisch orientierten Trinitätslehre,’ in Welker & Volf, *Der lebendige Gott*, 34–52.

31 A similar and instructive example would have been the essay by John Webster on ‘The Dignity of Creatures,’ in the *Festschrift for George Newlands, The God of Love and Human Dignity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark,

## 5. Pastoral purpose

In his instructive overview of the contemporary renaissance of the doctrine of the Trinity, Gijsbert van den Brink describes as the first characteristic (*grondtrek*) of this renaissance the way in which trinitarian thought has again been seen as central to soteriology, to the biblical message of salvation. He calls this trend the '*Heimholung van de triniteitsleer in de soteriologie*' (the relocation of the doctrine of the Trinity to its original home, namely, soteriology).<sup>32</sup>

This description is most certainly true of the role of the doctrine in Calvin's own thought and work. Commentators, of course, use many different words to describe this thrust, not always soteriology. Some speak of his pastoral approach, some of piety or even spirituality. Many underline the rhetorical nature of his work, by which they want to stress that he always had specific audiences in mind, particular listeners or readers, with their specific issues, questions, needs and convictions – and he wanted to address them, to comfort, and to challenge them.

Charles Partee bases his recent study on *The Theology of John Calvin* on the conviction that the overall structure of the *Institutes* is determined by his exposition of God who is *for* us (books I and II) and God who is *with* us (book III, on the faithful person and book IV, on the faithful community). In fact, Partee follows the same structure for his own book as well:

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2007), ed. Paul Middleton, 19–34. Although not Reformed, Webster is a very authoritative voice on Barth, interpreted within the Reformed tradition, and his approach in this essay most clearly shows the same characteristics. He argues that a theology of human dignity will be well-ordered when it is organized around the *magnalia Dei*, the great deeds of God; namely, 'the long-familiar three-moment' pattern of creation-reconciliation-perfection ... Though not without its limitations ... this arrangement can provide space for conceptual analysis without abandoning the historical character of the divine economy'.

From this perspective, he then gives a three-fold answer to the question concerning the dignity of creatures. 'Human dignity has its basis in the loving act of God the creator who summons creatures into being and bestows life upon them, ordering their nature and determining their destiny by calling them to enact their being in fellowship with himself; God the reconciler defeats creatures' trespass upon their own dignity, restoring them to fellowship with himself and re-establishing their dignity; God the perfecter completes the dignity of creatures, gathering them into the fellowship of the saints and empowering them actively to testify to God's perfection of human dignity.' The characteristic trinitarian spread cannot be clearer.

32 Van den Brink, 'Hedendaagse Renaissance' 218–221.

*The mystery that holds together the confession of God for Us and God with Us is the conviction of God in Us, or, more accurately, We in God ... This union with Christ who is one with God is the central and irreducible mystery of Christian faith and life. God is for us in Jesus Christ, and God is with us in Jesus Christ.*<sup>33</sup>

Although Partee uses this focus on the mystery to argue for a christological rather than a trinitarian structure to the *Institutes*, he once again underlines the soteriological, pastoral, or pious thrust of Calvin's theology very convincingly.

The title of Baars's *magnum opus* also captures Calvin's pastoral thrust very well, but in his case explicitly with regard to Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity; namely, *Concerning God's Highness and Nearness: Calvin on the Trinity*. It is about God being both 'exalted' and 'very near' at the same time, and both forms of knowledge of the living God are full of comfort and grace. This living God of the Bible is both able and trustworthy, both holy and transcendent, and both near and gracious.

Here, Michael Welker's comment is representative of a further, fourth characteristic Reformed trait in recent trinitarian discussions. It is not about idle speculation, about any form of *Glasperlenspiel*. Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity should help us to both understand and keep the long-suffering patience of faith in the midst of experiences of shattering senselessness and futility.<sup>34</sup>

The doctrine of the trinity, speaking the biblical language of the living God who is for, with and in us, is a *pastoral* message, helping faith to remain patient amid the many experiences of destructive and meaningless suffering and violence.<sup>35</sup>

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33 Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 40–41. He discusses four popular suggestions concerning the structure of the *Institutes* between 1536 and 1560; namely, Warfield's idea of the Apostles' Creed, Dowe's suggestion of the twofold knowledge of God, the trinitarian suggestion (represented by Philip Butin), and his own proposal of the union with Christ. Whether Calvin actually had any single dividing principle in mind is a secondary question. Partee certainly portrays the pastoral natural of Calvin's work in a moving way.

34 Welker, 'Der erhaltende, rettende und erhebende Gott. Zu einer biblisch orientierten Trinitätslehre,' in Welker & Volf, *Der lebendige Gott*, 36. 'Die Trinitätslehre soll vielmehr helfen, den langen Atem des Glaubens zu verstehen und zu bewahren inmitten der Erfahrungen zerstörerischer Sinnlosigkeit und 'Zweckwidrigkeit' in dieser Welt.'

35 One could argue that the deepest motivation behind Barth's radical contribution to the trinitarian renaissance was also pastoral or

## 6. Practical pattern

‘Ever since God exhibited Godself to us as a *Father*, we must be convicted of extreme ingratitude if we do not in turn exhibit ourselves as God’s children. Ever since *Christ* purified us by the laver of his blood, and communicated this purification by baptism, it would ill become us to be defiled with new pollution. Ever since Christ ingrafted us into his body, we, who are his members, should anxiously beware of contracting any stain or taint. Ever since Christ who is our head ascended to heaven, it is befitting in us to withdraw our affections from the earth, and with our whole soul aspire to heaven. Ever since the *Holy Spirit* dedicated us as temples to the Lord, we should make it our endeavour to show forth the glory of God, and guard against being profaned by the defilement of sin.’

These words stand almost at the beginning of Calvin’s well-known exposition of the Christian life. He is explaining why believers should ‘dedicate and devote themselves to righteousness’ – deliberately using a ‘trinitarian spread’. This is very common in his work, not only to use a trinitarian pattern when he explains something, but in fact to use such a trinitarian pattern when he is discussing the Christian life, sanctification, holiness, and the believers’ calling.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, the trinitarian grammar that the living God of the covenant is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has practical implications, according to Calvin. The knowledge that this God is for us, in us and with us should have practical consequences – but how? As crucially important as this insight indeed is, it may be necessary to distinguish carefully in this regard, in order to appreciate the typical Reformed appropriation of this fundamental conviction.

Calvin himself does not draw practical conclusions based on the inner life of the immanent Trinity. His arguments are not built on notions of relationality, identity, and difference, or the social nature of the divine life. His hesitance or reluctance to be drawn into those discussions results in a seeming lack of knowledge regarding the immanent

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soteriological in nature, in that he wanted to safeguard the truth or the trustworthiness of the gospel, providing assurance of faith; see, for example, from the many studies the two brief accounts by Alan Torrance, ‘The Trinity,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ed. John Webster, 72–91; and George Hunsinger, ‘Mysterium Trinitatis: Barth’s Conception of Eternity’ in *For the Sake of the World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2004), ed. George Hunsinger, 165–190.

<sup>36</sup> For these words, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), in the translation of Beveridge, slightly adapted, Book III/6.3. This is typical of many discussions in his work.

Trinity, which makes it very difficult to draw direct conclusions, for example, with a view to ecclesiology, ethics, or anthropology – at least in the way that has become popular in many recent trinitarian projects. Some theologians in the Reformed family are clearly attracted to these figures of thought, and therefore develop their own relational or social ecclesiologies, sometimes even with explicit critique of Calvin's reluctance in this regard, but perhaps it is fair to say that this is not characteristic of mainstream Reformed theology.<sup>37</sup>

The more typical way would be to follow Calvin's logic, and to develop practical implications of the trinitarian spread, according to the conviction that believers belong to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and are claimed, called, and renewed by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. In this way, many innovative, influential, and inspiring proposals have been forthcoming from Reformed theologians during the last decades – for the nature of our practical knowledge of God; for faith, piety, and spirituality; for worship and liturgy; for ecclesiology; for the ecumenical nature of the church; for the mission of the church; for a life of baptism and the Lord's Supper; for the Christian life and ethics. Again, Reformed publications on

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37 Many of the Reformed voices in the trinitarian renaissance seem concerned that there was too little interest in Calvin in the so-called immanent Trinity. Many contradictory interpretations are therefore given to the place of God's *aseitas* or God's hiddenness, sometimes appealing to Calvin, sometimes clearly critical of his perceived lack of interest. The term *Verhevenheid* (highness) in Baars's title is a deliberate attempt to argue that this was indeed important for Calvin. Baars says that God is 'more' than we know, although not 'different.' Again, many voices are critical because they feel that more attention to the relational or social nature of the immanent Trinity could show constructive avenues; for example, to develop ecclesiology, ethics, and even anthropology. Moltmann provides a well-known example, often discussed; but so also Cornelius Plantinga Jr., 'Social Trinity and Tritheism,' in Plantinga & Feenstra (eds.), *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 21–47. For a discussion of Calvin, Barth and Bruce McCormack and their views on God's hiddenness, see for example Paul Helm, *John Calvin and the Hiddenness of God and Engaging the Doctrine of God. Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2008), ed. Bruce L. McCormack, 67–82. Comparing Calvin to Augustine in this regard, John Webster, for example, calls Calvin's comments 'more terse' (about a theological conception of aseity), 'more muted' (about the immanent dimension), 'characteristically reticent' (about the trinitarian dimensions), 'less concerned' – in short, 'what Calvin offers is an account of the aseity of God from the economic perspective,' in his 'Life in and of Himself: Reflections on God's Aseity,' in McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, especially 121–123. Perhaps that is the most one can claim with some accuracy.

these themes are many and popular. Perhaps three illustrations of this Reformed thought pattern could suffice – respectively on the church, on mission, and on the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

In his widely read doctoral dissertation *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin’s Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine–Human Relationship*, Butin first offers an account of what he calls ‘The Trinity: Calvin’s theological paradigm for God’s economic relationship with humanity’. The emphasis is clearly on the economy of salvation, on a trinitarian relationship with human beings. In the second part, he develops this trinitarian paradigm as the ‘basis, pattern, and dynamic’ for the divine–human relationship. ‘Basis’ refers to the revelation of God as triune, ‘pattern’ refers to redemption as the trinitarian way in which this God mediates, restores and redeems human beings, and ‘dynamic’ refers to the human response called forth by this trinitarian action towards humanity. In a final part, ‘The Trinity and the visibility of grace’. he considers practical implications for church, baptism and the eucharist.<sup>38</sup>

In a series of works and over many years during the twentieth century, Lesslie Newbigin made this characteristic Reformed trinitarian spread fruitful for missiological thought and action. Already, in *The Household of God*, he had suggested a trinitarian ecumenical ecclesiology, by correlating the biblical images of the ‘congregation of the faithful’, the ‘body of Christ’, and the ‘community of the Holy Spirit’ broadly with Protestant, Catholic, and Pentecostal traditions. The argument was the – characteristically Reformed – attempt to demonstrate that the wholeness of the church described in the scriptures requires adequate emphasis on all three of these ecclesial patterns.<sup>39</sup> In his influential

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38 Philip W Butin, *Revelation, Redemption and Response. Calvin’s Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine–Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford, 1995); also his popular introductory study *The Trinity* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001). According to Baars, Butin is another example of someone who moves too far away from Calvin himself, into the direction of a social Trinity.

39 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1953). It is interesting that already a few years earlier another influential Reformed theologian made a similar argument in North America. In 1946, H. Richard Niebuhr published an essay called ‘The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church’ in *Theology Today* (1946), in which he claimed that ‘[t]he doctrine (of the Trinity) also has great importance for an ecumenical theology as a formulation of the whole Church’s faith in God in distinction from the partial faiths and partial formulations of parts of the Church and of individuals in the Church’. He described Christianity as ‘an association, loosely held together, of three Unitarian religions,’ namely a ‘Unitarianism of the Creator’, a ‘Unitarianism of



small monograph called *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*, he made a deliberate attempt to redirect the ecumenical movement toward a more comprehensive trinitarian ecclesiology.<sup>40</sup> His *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* is directly and systematically based on a typical trinitarian spread, describing 'mission' as 'proclaiming the kingdom of the Father', 'sharing the Life of the Son' and 'bearing the witness of the Spirit'.<sup>41</sup> On the basis of these ideas, he later engaged very critically with new developments in the ecumenical movement, and argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is 'public truth' and should be part of public debate in contemporary societies.<sup>42</sup>

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Jesus Christ', and a 'Unitarianism for which the Spirit is the one and only God ... (perhaps) the most prevalent of all. All Christian spiritualism tends in this direction'. He then pointed out 'The Inadequacies of the Three Unitarianisms' and argued for 'the Trinitarianism of the whole Church'. Reprinted in H Richard Niebuhr. *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), ed. William Stacy Johnson, 50–62.

40 Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission* (Richmond: John Knox, 1964). These were also the years during which trinitarian faith, especially influenced by Karl Barth, had a major impact on the ecumenical movement and on missiological reflection and work through the concept of the *missio Dei*. This later became contested terrain, but there can be little doubt about the lasting role of this characteristically Reformed trinitarian thought in this regard. David Bosch describes this history with careful detail and sensitive insight in his *Transforming Mission. Paradigms Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 389–393. 'Throughout, the Barthian influence was crucial ... Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology ... As far as missionary thinking was concerned, this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation ... Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate. Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people.'

41 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).

42 See for example his critical response to Konrad Raiser, 'Ecumenical Amnesia' in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* No X. 18/1 (Jan. 1994), 2–5; also his 'The Trinity as Public Truth,' in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 1–8. The deepest ground for his critique was to be found in his impression that in contemporary ecumenical thought, trinitarian language seems to have become a mere indication for plurality, for a vague notion of difference, without any basis in the Christ-event, in other words, that it has lost its grounding in the economy of salvation, so characteristic of the Reformed tradition, For an account of the

In his influential work called *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, Michael Welker deals very closely with the detail of the biblical account of the Last Supper, but divided into three parts that broadly correspond with the trinitarian spread ('thanking God', 'celebrating in the presence of Jesus Christ', 'joyful glorification of the Triune God'). In addition to this overall structure of the whole discussion, the final chapter is specifically called 'In the Name of God, the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit,' and reflects on 'the presence and activity of the Triune God in the supper as source of spiritual renewal'.<sup>43</sup>

Together, these three approaches illustrate a *fifth* and final characteristic of Reformed trinitarian thought. In accordance with Calvin's point of departure in the *Institutes*, knowledge of God and knowledge of self are intimately related; the one does not exist without the other. This implies that trinitarian biblical language about the one Living God who is for us, with us and in us will have *practical* consequences, for who we are and what we are called to be.

It is therefore typical of such an approach that two positions are rejected, simultaneously. On the one hand, the conviction represented by Kant and even in the Reformed family by Schleiermacher, that the doctrine of the Trinity does not have any practical use, is denied. On the other hand, the conviction so popular as part of the renaissance of the doctrine that it is possible to draw ecclesiological and ethical conclusions from the immanent Trinity is regarded with some reserve, since this may so easily turn into circular argument and even forms of ideological language, where divine sanction is given to ideas people already harboured before they recognized them again in God.<sup>44</sup>

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debate, see also Geoffrey Wainwright, Lesslie Newbigin. *A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 129–134.

43 Michael Welker, *What happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000).

44 See the valuable warning by Van den Brink, who points out that one may easily use the doctrine of the Trinity to support some favourite cause of one's own, instead of allowing the doctrine to have a critical function towards one's own (political, social etc.) intuitions. Theologians should be careful not to utilise the doctrine of the Trinity in ideological ways; *Hedendaagse Renaissance*, 237. For a thoughtful proposal on how to 'relate the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian moral life,' see the contributions by the Reformed theologian Robert Vosloo, 'Identity, Otherness and the Triune God' *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* Vol 119 (July 2004), 69, 89, in which he considers possibilities of 'model,' 'imagination,' and 'participation,' pleading for 'enriching the participatory imagination,' especially drawing on the notion of perichoresis; also 'The gift of participation: on the Triune God and the Christian moral life,' *Scriptura* Vol 79/1 (2002), 93–105, considering

7. The key place of the doctrine in the Reformed tradition – coincidental?

So, is the key place of the doctrine of the Trinity in the work of so many Reformed theologians of the last decades coincidental, or not? Broadly speaking, they are all part of the much larger renaissance – in which, however, the Reformed Karl Barth played a pivotal role. Was it coincidental that Barth developed those insights, so early in his career, at a time in which he delved deeply into Calvin and the Reformed confessional heritage?

When one looks more closely, however, it does seem that the enthusiasm with which many of these Reformed theologians appeal to the trinitarian faith, and particularly the most characteristic ways in which they do this, do seem to correlate with basic intuitions in the early Reformers, including Calvin, particularly that trinitarian language offers a way to tell the story of the scriptures, to know God as the living God, acting as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, graciously loving, saving, and comforting us *and* calling, claiming, and renewing us, in rich and complex ways – always in the plural (Noordmans).

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notions such as analogy, imitation, and again imagination and participation. Appealing to Bonhoeffer and Welker, he concludes with the self-critical reminder – fully in the spirit of the Reformed motifs described here – that ‘a description of the Christian life through the Spirit is subject to dissolution in a hazy mysticism that dislocates the Christian moral life from the economy of salvation. Or, put differently: our participation in God is a participation in Christ and through the Spirit’ 101.



# The Trinity in the Belgic Confession (1561), The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and *The Canons Of Dordt* (1618–1619)?

Henco van der Westhuizen

## 1. Introduction

The article asks about the doctrine of the Trinity in *The Canons of Dordt* (1618–1619). The *Canons*, of course, did not, in the first place, address the question of the Trinity. It addressed questions under the caption of predestination.

In his essay on the doctrine of predestination in Reformed orthodoxy, Rouwendal (2013:558)<sup>1</sup> argues that predestination, like any doctrine in the Reformed theological system, was ‘no freestanding component’. It was related to other doctrines and this relation was such that, removing the doctrine of predestination from the system, ‘threatened the ability to maintain other doctrines’. To remove or change any one of the doctrines that were in this system could in fact be a threat to upholding the biblical doctrine of predestination. He argues that predestination had its roots in the doctrine of God. In fact, ‘his eternity, will, knowledge, unchangeableness, and so forth were the soil on which the doctrine of predestination grew’.<sup>2</sup>

The question about the Trinity in *The Canons of Dordt* therefore requires an in-depth understanding of the doctrine of God in the Reformed orthodoxy of the early modern period (1500–1700). Muller (2016), however, recently argued that the theologies that arose in Reformed circles during the two centuries between the 16th century and the beginning of the 18th were diverse and variegated with differences arising out of

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1 Please note that all the quotes in each respective paragraph belong to the author mentioned at the beginning of that paragraph unless indicated otherwise.

2 Compare in this regard also the essays on Christ and predestination by Van Asselt (2013; 2016).

*local issues and controversies, church-political concerns in various states and principalities, varied receptions of the older theological and philosophical traditions, (and) differing appropriations and rejections of the newer philosophical approaches of the era (Muller 2016:167).*

He makes it clear that Reformed orthodoxy or the development thereof was anything but monolithic.

This is also the case when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity in the early modern period. Beck (2016b:196) argues that the renewed interest and research with regard to the doctrine of God in the early modern period have unveiled ‘a considerable diversity of detail that underlie the apparent uniformity resulting from the common use of the scholastic method’. Although the Reformed orthodox systems were meant to fit within confessional borders that in themselves showed some variety of different regions and times, they did not form a monolithic bloc.

The question regarding the Trinity in *The Canons of Dordt* can naturally be answered in numerous ways. It is possible to ask how the first- or second-generation Reformers, or the medieval period<sup>3</sup> in which their doctrines developed, generally understood the Trinity and how the Reformed orthodox doctrine, as found in *Dordt*, corresponds to or differs from these doctrines.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Vos (2013:125), for whom early modern Reformed theology is mainly scholastic, argues that mediaeval studies are crucial for post-Reformation studies, as Protestant Scholasticism ‘is simply a part of the whole of Western Scholasticism’. For a perspective on the sources, methods and forms of different perspectives within early modern theology, compare Leinsle (2016).

4 In his essay on Calvin and the Canons of Dordt, for example, Sinnema (2011c) argued that, although the Canons were most certainly influenced by John Calvin, it is almost impossible to be sure what the Synod took from him. For a perspective on his thoughts on the doctrine of the Trinity, compare Baars (2005). His thoughts have inter alia been picked up by Smit (2009:36–50) in his essay on the Trinity in the Reformed tradition. He asks if the doctrine of the Trinity have any special significance for the early figures in the Reformed tradition and for their successors, if it is possible to distinguish specific Reformed perspectives regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. He answers by referring to at least five motifs that appear regularly in Reformed thought, in Calvin and again, albeit in diverse and complex ways, in well-known 20th century theologians. These motifs include the following: a ‘Biblical grammar’; the motif of a ‘living God’; a ‘Trinitarian spread’; the motifs of a ‘pastoral purpose’; and a ‘practical pattern’. For a perspective on Calvin’s thoughts on the Dordt related theme of predestination, compare Muller (2008:17–38). In terms of the question of this article, it is important to ask regarding the relation between Calvin’s doctrine of the Trinity and predestination.

It is also possible to ask how the Reformed confessions, more particularly the *Belgic Confession* (1561) and the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), understood the Trinity. The Synod of Dordt were in agreement with these confessions. In fact, they did not want to deviate from them.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of the *Belgic Confession*, Beck (2016a), for example, argued that the first article of the Confession where God is described as ‘eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty, completely wise, just, good, the overflowing source of all good’ should not be understood as

*an attempt at an abstract conceptualization of the divine Being, but as a statement in the context of divine attributes as they have been included through the centuries in the doctrine of God (Beck 2016a:26).*

For Beck (2016a:29), the same is true of the articles of the *Belgic Confession* on the Trinity where God is inter alia described as the ‘one God, who is one single essence, in whom there are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties – namely, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’. The Father is described as ‘the cause, origin, and source of all things, visible as well as invisible’, the Son as ‘the Word, the Wisdom, and the image of the Father’ and the Holy Spirit as ‘the eternal power and might, proceeding from the Father and the Son’. According to the *Belgic Confession* (Art. 8), ‘this distinction does not divide God into three’. Rather, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit ‘each has his own subsistence distinguished by characteristics’, in such a manner that the three is only one God. Despite their distinctions, they are ‘neither divided nor fused nor mixed together’. In fact, ‘all are equal from eternity, in one and the same essence’. There is neither a first nor a last; ‘all three are one in truth and power, in goodness and mercy’.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Te Velde (2015:127), for example, argued that, while the Catechism ‘limits itself to basic statements of the points of Christian doctrine, without the detailed questions and concepts of scholarly theology’, the co-author Zacharias Ursinus, who

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5 Rohls (1998:22) states that the Synod of Dordt ‘confirmed the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism as confessional writings of the church of the Netherlands’. In line with Rohls, Van Lieburg (2011) argued that, despite the great significance of the Dordt synod as the delimiter and guardian of Reformed truth, the fact remains that decisions concerning the doctrine of predestination had already been made earlier in Dutch reformed history (2011:1)

6 In terms of this article, the question of the relation between the doctrine of the Trinity and of predestination will have to be asked.



was thoroughly trained in the scholastic philosophy and theology of his time, considered at a deeper and more detailed level the implications of the brief statements. What is interesting is his argument is that Ursinus in his detailed explications ‘establishes a deeper connection between the immanent and the economical Trinity’, on the one hand, and on the other, that

*the divine properties or attributes do not belong to an abstract, philosophical and un-biblical conception of God, but that these attributes explicate the nature and character of the true, Triune God.*

In fact, the attributes ‘arise from the Trinitarian economy of salvation’. It is for this reason, he argues, that the Heidelberg Catechism does not contain a separate doctrine of God as it is ‘included and implied by the doctrine of the Trinity it teaches’.<sup>7</sup>

It will, however, also be possible to ask about the doctrine of the Trinity in the theology of Arminius,<sup>8</sup> and as a second question, his followers, to which the Synod of Dordt reacted. In fact, in his essay on the Trinity in the mentioned period, Lehner (2011) argues that the Trinitarian thought of Jacob Arminius has often been neglected.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, however, the question regarding the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt will specifically be asked in light of a broader structure of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God in the early modern period. Despite the fact that the Synod (led by Bogerman)<sup>10</sup> advised that ‘the orthodox doctrine of the Reformed churches should be set forth, as much as possible, in the very clearest words suitable to the capacity and edification of the

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7 Again, in terms of this article, is the question of the relation between the doctrine of the Trinity and predestination.

8 Compare in this regard Bangs (1998), Brian (2015), Den Boer (2010; 2011), Muller (2002), Olsen (2009), Stanglin (2009), Van Leeuwen (2009) and Van Leeuwen, Stanglin and Tolsma (2009).

9 Prior to the important research of Muller (1991) and Dekker (1993), Den Boer (2010) argues: Arminius’s theology was almost exclusively approached from the five most controversial points as expressed in the Remonstrance (1610), the disputes that followed it, and finally the decisions made at the Synod of Dordt. (p. 35) Where Stanglin and McCall (2012:81) remark that ‘even a cursory reading of Arminius’s work on the Trinity shows that he was deeply committed to classical Trinitarian orthodoxy’, Lehner (2011:248) reiterates that the Remonstrants ‘gave up the Trinity as a fundamental article of faith’. The question is thus not only how Arminius’s doctrine of the Trinity relates to predestination. These relations are also to be studied in the Remonstrants’ theology leading up to Dordt.

10 Bogerman quoted in Sinnema (2011b:318).

common people and be supported by very solid reasons and arguments', and in spite of the fact that 'the order and style of these canons (were) to be directed to the instruction of the churches', in other words, that the Canons were 'not (to) be scholastic or academic';<sup>11</sup> it was coloured by the scholasticism that characterised the delegates' own theologies. In fact, Dordt cannot be understood without at least an analysis of the underlying scholastic structure.<sup>12</sup>

The first part of this article will therefore attempt to shed light on the Trinity in the early modern period of Reformed orthodoxy. The aim of this part of the article is *not* to give a detailed description of what the Reformed doctrine of the Trinity is as if there is a doctrine of God in this period. This part rather asks about the broader structure of the doctrine of the triune God in this period's Reformed orthodoxy. In this light, the second part will highlight an understanding of the inherent doctrine of the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt. The fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is merely inherent in what is now being confessed as one of the three *formulieren van eenigheid* is of importance, as the Canons is inter alia not to be loosened, firstly, from the questions it wanted to answer;<sup>13</sup> and secondly, from the way it wanted to answer these questions.

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11 Sinnema (1986) argues that: although the scholastic approach was well established by the early seventeenth century, it was nevertheless common for Reformed theology to make a distinction between the scholastic treatment of theology, done especially in the schools, and a popular treatment of theology, done in preaching and in teaching the uneducated (1986:497). He highlights that the popular character of the Canons does not mean 'that no scholastic thinking was involved in the formation of the Canons'. He argues, rather, that 'behind the popularly written Canons lay, in the minds of the drafters, a somewhat scholastic understanding of their order'.

12 Beck (2016a:35) argues that if the Canons of Dordt is analysed in its historical context by taking into account the scholastic background of the delegates and their debates, it becomes clear that, on the one hand, 'the Reformed confessions do not belong to the genre of scholastic writing and are not primarily meant to be used in the academic setting', and on the other, that the scholastic background of these theologians enabled them to place their confessional writings in the broader catholic tradition of the Christian church and to include patristic and mediaeval theological insights'. Beck would therefore argue that despite the diversity inherent in both orthodox and scholastic thinking, 'there is no conflict but harmony' between them. For him: studying these confessions against the background of the more scholastic writings of their authors may even help to fully see the theological nuances in their articles on doctrines such as divine predestination. (2016a:35; compare also Van Asselt 2007).

13 The 'several drafts of the Canons, amendment suggestions on some of the drafts by the various delegations at the Synod, and a variety of

## 2. The Trinity in Reformed orthodoxy

Beck (2016b:197–204) has argued that it is true of most, if not all, Reformed orthodox theologians ‘that the triune God is envisaged from the very beginning’. Throughout the *locus de Deo*, he argues, they had the Trinitarian God in mind. In fact, ‘the Reformed orthodox considered the doctrine of the Trinity to be a fundamental article of faith, the use of which was essential for all Christians’.

Muller, in *The Triunity of God* (2003d),<sup>14</sup> argues that the Reformed orthodox developed their teaching on the Trinity in conscious dialogue with the patristic and medieval tradition. For him, the history of the doctrine of the Trinity from the 16th to the 18th centuries is, from one perspective, ‘little more than the history of the defence of traditional orthodox formulations against a variety of resurgent ... heresies’. However, a rather different picture emerges if the question is asked regarding the Trinity in terms of

*the extent and manner in which the theologians of the Reformation and Reformed orthodoxy received and used the materials of the tradition, the ways in which they dealt with the problems of anti-Trinitarian heresies<sup>15</sup> and the patterns of stress and strain on both language and*

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drafting committee documents’ are, of course, also to be reflected on if the question regarding the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt is to be answered sufficiently. This is clear in Sinnema (2011a:291, 307), who argues that the collection of informal working documents on the formation of the Canons are significant as they ‘make it possible to trace the development of thought that went into the drafting of the specific articles of the Canons’, thus contributing to a more differentiated conceptualisation of the ‘nuances of thought and why an article is formulated the way it is’. As these documents have never been gathered into a collection, and as they have not been precisely identified and only a few have ever been transcribed from the original Latin, this article will restrict its focus to the Canons of Dordt. For an attempt to put the Synod in its proper historical context by an exploration of newsprints, propaganda, allegorical representations, satires and emblems related to the Synod of Dordt, compare Spaans (2011).

14 Muller’s *Post-Reformation Reformed dogmatics* consists out of four volumes. The first volume deals with the *Prolegomena to theology* (2003a), volume two with *Holy Scripture* (2003b) as the cognitive foundation of theology, and volume three with the *Divine essence and attributes* (2003c).

15 Muller (2003d:59) argues that the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated in the context of large-scale assault on the Trinity. This is also the argument of Lehner who argues that the 16th century not only saw a diversification of Christianity in its characteristic confessionalisms, but an anti-Trinitarian movement. Lehner (2011:240, [*author’s italics*])

## The Trinity in the Belgic Confession

*exegesis caused by the philosophical and critical changes that took place in the course of these centuries (Muller 2003d:59).*

Muller (2003d) argues that the Reformed orthodox theologians with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity grounded the formulae and the traditional language more completely and explicitly on the biblical traditions than had been done for centuries.<sup>16</sup> According to him, dogmatic concepts were eminently biblical in their meaning and intention despite the non-biblical origins of the oft used language. Although these theologians were wary of philosophical speculation, even to the point of finding many of the arguments of the fathers and the scholastics unacceptable, it is for him, fairly clear that the orthodox reception of the scholastic method, *inter alia* provided a

*methodological and philosophical context within which traditional Trinitarian language well served the needs of orthodoxy in the face of continuing pressure from the anti-Trinitarian arguments and other critics of dogmas (Muller 2003d:61).*<sup>17</sup>

In his essay on the doctrine of God in Reformed orthodoxy, Rehnman (2013:356) answers the question of why the Reformed orthodox' doctrine of God is divided into the existence of God, the nature and attributes of God, and the persons in God by arguing that 'a discourse about God supposes an (more or less clear) account of how words can be used meaningfully about God'.<sup>18</sup> According to him, it is central to Reformed orthodoxy 'that humans

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interestingly adds the explosion of mystical theology, 'with its numerous approaches to the mystery of the *triune* God'.

16 Compare Trueman (2016) who argues that, during these centuries: a series of intellectual developments and theological challenges continued to press the Reformed toward greater refinement, both of their doctrine of scripture and understanding of exegesis, while also calling into question whether a commitment to traditional theological formulations regarding the unity of scripture and possibility of connecting traditional doctrine to scripture, was possible (2016:180).

17 Muller (2003d) adds the Reformed orthodox reception of the early orthodox critical appropriation of philosophical views of the older dogmatic tradition. Krop (2011:50, [*author's italics*]) argues 'for the absence of *direct* links between the philosophical views adopted by the delegates and the conclusions reached in the theological issues debated at Dordt'. This is the case despite the fact that 'a significant number of the delegates at the Synod were professional philosophers'.

18 Rehnman (2013) argues that the doctrinal progression from God's existence (part 1) over God's nature and attributes (part 2) to persons in God (part 3) should be obvious: for, that there is something has to be settled before what this something is like can be considered; and what

cannot know what God is or can only know what God is not'. Although knowing God is impossible, it is possible to talk about God. He therefore argues that the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God is 'structured in response to this difficulty of talking meaningfully about God'. For him, three ways – causality, negation and eminence – structures the doctrine, highlighting his argument that the doctrine is divided on the basis of an account of how language is used about God.

The first part on the existence of God provides the basis for talking about God. Rehnman (2013:357) argues that human discourse about God cannot proceed 'from some innate concept or idea of God that causes us to know that God is'. Reformed orthodoxy therefore typically argues that 'all knowledge of God is from effects to cause'. It is possible to speak about God 'from things in the world known as effects of their first cause'. The basis of the doctrine of God therefore is the minimal affirmation that God is the first cause of everything.

The doctrine on the existence of God is about 'what humans strictly can know of God, namely the positive statement that God is' (Rehnman 2013:368). This requires both biblical exegesis and philosophical reflection. The brief treatment of the existence of God is not aimed, however, at 'establishing the existence of God', as would have been done in philosophy, but rather 'to remind the reader that a cause of everything has been established'.

For Rehnman (2013), Reformed orthodoxy therefore generally maintains a causal argument, demonstrating the existence of God 'from effect to cause', thus commonly defending the *a posteriori* and not the *a priore* argument for the existence of God, demonstrating *that* God is, and not why or what God is. This doctrinal part does not claim knowledge of what God is, but simply 'that the word "God" can be used correctly only for whatever is the cause of the being of everything else'. In other words

*if God were not the cause of everything that exists, then God would not be what we use the term 'God' for; namely, that which could not be otherwise than it is (Rehnman 2013:370).*

The second part of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God has to do with the divine nature and attributes. Every cause 'exerts itself in bringing about effects and communicates some likeness or similitude of itself to its effect(s)' (Rehnman 2013:359). This is the case as it is generally held 'that every effect is what it is because of what its cause is'. The Reformed

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something is like has to be settled before the manner this something can be considered (386).

orthodox, however, distinguishes between a univocal cause, 'that can be grasped by the same concept', and an equivocal cause, 'when the definitions of what a cause is and what an effect is are not the same'. It is the Reformed orthodox understanding of God as an equivocal cause that comes to expression in the widespread Reformed orthodox division of divine attributes into 'communicable and incommunicable ones'. This distinction therefore subdivides the second part of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God into two parts.

The first subdivision of the second part concerns the incommunicable attributes, 'saying God is *not* so and so'. Rather than leading to positive affirmations straightaway, the basis provided by part one leads to negative affirmations concerning God, namely 'that God does not exist with the composite, variable, temporal, and finite features of the creation' (Rehnman 2013:359). For him, the seemingly positive predications are thus really negative predications or denials.

The second subdivision of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God concerns the communicable attributes, 'saying God is *so* and so' (Rehnman 2013:360). It is possible for people to talk about God in terms of such likeness because of what they know about God's effects or works, for 'every cause communicates some likeness, resemblance, similitude, or analogy of itself to its effect(s)'. The basis for the possibility of saying something about God 'is the principle that effects are like or similar to their causes'. In God causing them to exist, 'God communicates some likeness of himself' to what he caused to exist. This causal likeness thus is 'the ground for analogical predication'.

For Rehnman (2013:371), this part thus concerns 'both God as wholly other than what everything else is, and God as somewhat similar to what everything else is'. It begins with 'a denial of every limitation to God (*incommunicable*)' and continues with an affirmation of 'some similarities to God (*communicable*)'.

In terms of the incommunicable attributes, 'simplicity' is mentioned first. By 'simplicity' is meant that 'nothing is in God that is not God himself' (Rehnman 2013:377–379). Second is 'infinity', by which is meant 'utter boundlessness, without every limit and boundary, not restrained by any boundaries'. This infinity is related to 'space' in the sense of 'immense or immeasurable space', and to 'time' in the sense of 'eternity or ceaselessness' (Rehnman 2013:379–381). He thirdly mentions 'immutability' or changelessness which means that 'God brings about change but is not changing'. In fact, it is denied that God changes at all or

to even have the possibility to change, whether in terms of existence or will (Rehnman 2013:381).<sup>19</sup>

According to Rehnman (2013:384), the incommunicable attributes make the communicable attributes *just* communicable, that is, 'predictable analogically and not univocally'. In terms of the principle communicable attributes he mentions, in the first place, 'life'. By this attribute is meant that God is conceived 'as directing, enjoining, and executing created things'. Inwardly, this life is connected to 'intellect and will', and outwardly, to 'power'.<sup>20</sup>

The third part of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God has to do with the persons in God. The doctrine of the Trinity aims at coherence in the statement that the three Persons in the Godhead are one person 'by means of technical terms and analogical reasoning' (Rehnman 2013:391).

For Rehnman (2013:386), everything that can be truly said of God, can be truly said of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; yet 'everything that can be truly said of each, cannot be truly said of all'. For the Reformed orthodox theologians, 'what God is like needs to be set out *before* God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be explained'. It is in this manner, he argues, that the parts of the Reformed doctrine of God make up one whole. For him, to proceed in the opposite direction would mean that 'there are three Gods of one divine kind'.

The Reformed orthodox doctrine of the persons in God commonly begins with and persists 'in reaffirmations of the incomprehensibility and mystery of God' (Rehnman 2013:389). Although the words *Father*, *Son* and *Holy Spirit* can be used correctly of God, argues Rehnman, it is not always possible to know 'what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are'.<sup>21</sup> In

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19 In his chapter on the first order of divine attributes, Te Velde (2013:139) lists ten attributes – 'simplicity, independence, aseity, spirituality, infinity, eternity, omnipresence, incomprehensibility, immutability, and perfection' – which he then lists under the headings of the mentioned simplicity, infinity and immutability.

20 Te Velde (2013:139), in his chapter on the second order of divine attributes, refers to knowledge which 'directs the actor towards the possible options of action', the will which 'decides which of the possible actions should be performed', and power which 'is responsible for the actual execution of the preceding decision of the will'. Although he refers to 'knowledge' and not to the 'intellect' when referring to the second order divine attributes, as is the case with Rehnman (2013:175), Te Velde (2013:139) argues that the Reformed orthodox normally start with drawing a larger picture of God's cognitive capacities, including 'wisdom, skill, understanding, prudence, and indeed, knowledge'.

21 This is also the argument of Wisse and Meijer (2013). They argue from a Reformed scholastic perspective that the Holy Spirit, for example,



fact, 'we cannot understand how we are using these words in the context of God, namely, that God is (immutable) infinite simplicity and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. It is because of this incomprehensibility, he argues, 'that the Reformed orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is brief in comparison to the doctrine of God as a whole'.

The Reformed orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is thus about the analogical predication of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For him (Rehnman 2013:393), the communicability and incommunicability are therefore also central in this third and final part. The divine essence can be communicated to divine persons – 'the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit share being God or the divine essence is common to the divine persons'. But 'the manner in which the Father is God, the manner in which the Son is God, and the manner in which the Holy Spirit is God' can essentially not be communicated.

Rehnman (2013:393) acknowledges that, although Reformed orthodoxy does not generally abstract 'the meaning and use of talk about God' from the doctrine of God, as he did, this abstraction does allow further understanding of the structure of the doctrine.<sup>22</sup>

How, then, does the inherent Trinity in the Canons of Dordt relate to this structure of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God?

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was not always explicitly mentioned. This, however, is not due to a *Geistvergeessenheit*. It rather is: prompted by God's actions as the actions of all divine persons together, although these actions can sometimes be attributed to the Father, Son, or Spirit in a specific way. This is not because it belongs to one of them in an exclusive manner, but because Scripture speaks about it in this way. (515–518) In fact, they argue that: all appropriations to the distinct divine persons of the Trinity are limited by the fact that in every work of the Trinity *ad extra*, all three divine persons always play a role. An act of the Trinity is never an act of only one person. This implies also that the work of a specific person of the Trinity can never be made completely functionally transparent, because it will never be just one divine person who acts in a specific way within the Trinity. As a consequence of this, the relationship between the one divine essence and the three divine persons can never be completely elucidated.

22 Van Asselt and Rouwendal (2011:1) argue that the term scholasticism is to be associated 'not so much with content but with method, an academic form of argumentation and disputation'. Compare in this regard also Muller (2003e:25–46) on scholasticism and Reformed orthodoxy, and Goudriaan (2006) on the relation between philosophy and Reformed orthodoxy, focussing particularly on Gisbertius Voetius who was present at the Synod of Dordt, and Petrus van Mastricht and Antinius Driessen.

### 3. The Trinity in Dordt?

*The Canons of Dordt* does not start with the *predestining* God, as is suggested by its caption, but with all people who ‘will have sinned’ (*peccaverint*) (Art. 1). In fact, no one was ‘better or more deserving’ (*nec meliorum, nec digniorum*) (Art. 7, Rejection V, IX). They were all ‘equally lost’ (*æqualiter perditorum*), all in ‘common misery’ (*communi miseria*) and this was their ‘own fault’ (*sua culpa*) (Art. 6, 7). It was God’s right to ‘condemn them’ (*damnare*). Indeed, God would have done no one an ‘injustice’ (*injuriam*) if it had been his will to leave the entire human race in sin (Art. 1).

However, before the foundation of the world, in line with the ‘free good pleasure of his will’ (*secundum liberrimum voluntatis suæ beneplacitum*) (Art. 7, 10), with his ‘single good pleasure, purpose, and plan’ (*unicum ... beneplacitum, propositum, et consilium*) (Art. 8), ‘his entirely free, most just, irreproachable, and unchangeable good pleasure’ (*ex liberrimo, justissimo, irreprehensibili, et immutabili beneplacito*) (Art. 15), ‘out of mere grace’ (*ex mera gratia*), ‘in order to demonstrate his mercy’ (*ad demonstrationem suæ misericordiæ*) and ‘glorious grace’ (*gloriosæ suæ gratiæ*), God, ‘most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing, and almighty’ (*sapientissimus, immutabilis, omniscius, et omnipotens*) (Art. 11), in his ‘eternal decree’ (*æterno ... decreto*) ‘predestined’ (*prædestinavit*) a definite number of people to be ‘chosen’ (*electio*) (Art. 7).

It is not various elections, but ‘one and the same election for all’ (*Hæc electio non est multiplex, sed una et eadem*) (Art. 8, Rejection II), an election that ‘can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled’ (*nec interrumpi, nec mutari, revocari, aut abrumpi*) (Art. 11, Rejection II).

He did this in Jesus Christ whom he also ‘appointed from eternity’ (*etiam ab æterno*) for salvation (Art. 7). In fact, God revealed his ‘care’ (*charitas*) for the chosen by (sending) his ‘only-begotten’ (*unigenitum*) Son into the world (Art. 2). It was Christ that was to be ‘the mediator (*Mediatorem*), the head of all those chosen (*omnium electorum caput*), and the foundation of their salvation’ (*salutisque fundamentum constituit*) (Art. 7). God, in fact, decided to give the chosen ones to Christ, to ‘call and draw’ them effectively into Christ’s fellowship (*vocare ... trahere*) (Art. 3, 7).

He did this to bestow upon them true ‘faith’ (*fide*), ‘justification’ (*justificare*), ‘sanctification’ (*sanctificare*) through his ‘word and Spirit’ (*verbum et Spiritum*) (Art. 3, 7, Rejection I, [*author’s italics*]). These ‘fruits and effects’ (*fructus et effectus*) ‘flow forth’ (*profluunt*) from election (Art. 9) and they are secured or assured of this election not by an ‘inquisitive searching into the hidden deep things of God’ (*non quidem arcana et ... Dei curiose scrutando*) (Art. 12, Rejection V), but by the ‘infallible fruits’ (*fructus ... infallibiles*), inter alia by the ‘adoration of the fathomless depth of God’s

mercies' (*abyssum misericordiarum ejus adorandi*) (Art. 13, Rejection VII) pointed to in his word through the Spirit.

Through these gracious and 'free gift(s) of God' (*gratuitum Dei donum*) (Art. 5, Rejection III), those whom he has chosen with a true and living faith will be delivered from 'God's anger' (*ira Dei*); they will receive eternal life (Art. 2, 4). The fact that it is given to some and not to others is due to God's decree. The 'cause or blame' (*causa seu culpa*) for sin and unbelief, however, is not to be found in God, but in the people themselves. In fact, God is sin's 'fearful, irreproachable, just judge and avenger' (*tremendum, irreprehensibilem ... justum judicem ... vindicem*). The unchosen by his just judgement, he 'leaves' (*relinquit*) (Art. 6, 15). In fact, precisely as a 'display of his justice' (*ad declarationem justitiæ suæ*) (Art. 15, Rejection VIII), God's anger 'remains on those' (*super eos manet*) who do not believe (Art. 4). This election is thus not based on 'a prerequisite cause or condition' (*causa seu conditione*) in the person to be chosen (Art. 9, Rejection II, IV), but in God who is 'the cause' (*causa*) (Art. 10).

For the chosen, who cannot be cast off or their number reduced (Art. 11), this gracious and just 'election and reprobation' (*electionis et reprobationis*) thus is or offers 'comfort beyond words' (*ineffabile præstat solatium*) (Art. 6, Rejection VI). This is the 'unchangeable purpose of God' (*immutabile Dei propositum*) (Art. 7, Rejection VI) and it should be taught to God's people today. It should, however, be done with a 'spirit of discretion, in a godly and holy manner, at the appropriate time and place, without inquisitive searching into the ways of the Most High' (*cum spiritu discretionis, religiose et sancte, suo loco et tempore, missa omni curiosa viarum altissimi scrutatione*). In fact, it should be done 'for the glory of God's most holy name, and for the lively comfort of God's people' (*ad sanctissimi nominis divini gloriam, et vividum populi ipsius solatium*) (Art. 14, 16, 17). This is then what Dordt does in the following main points.

Where the focus was in the first main point on God's predestination or election, the second main point focuses on this election in Christ, *on his death and human redemption through it*. In a way, it is an explanation of what God did *in Christ*.

In line with the first main point, it starts with sin. God is not only 'supremely merciful' (*summe misericors*), but also 'supremely just' (*summe justus*) (Art. 1). This justice cannot be avoided and therefore all are to be punished for the sins committed against his 'infinite majesty' (*infinitam majestatem*) (Art. 1, Rejection V).

To avoid this justice, 'satisfaction' (*satisfacere*) is thus to be offered to God's justice. Because people are not able to give this to God (Rejection V), God himself 'in his boundless mercy' (*immensa misericordia*) gave them

such a satisfaction in Jesus Christ. In fact, as a ‘sponsor’ (*Sponsorem*), a new ‘covenant’ (*novum fœdus*) or a new ‘covenant of grace’ (*novum gratiæ fœdus*), his only-begotten Son was made to be sin ‘in their place, on the cross’ (*in cruce pro nobis*) (Art. 2, Rejection II). This death is the ‘only and entirely complete’ (*est unica et perfectissima*) satisfaction; it is ‘more than sufficient’ (*abunde sufficiens*) for atonement of all (Art. 3, Rejection VII). This is the case not only because Jesus Christ is ‘true and perfectly holy’ (*verus et perfecte sanctus*), but also because he is the Son of God, ‘of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit’ (*eiusdem æternæ et infinitæ cum Patre et Spiritus essentiæ*) (Art. 4).

The fact that many, despite his death being announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people (Art. 5), do not believe is not because what Christ did was ‘deficient or insufficient’ (*defectu, vel insufficientia*) (Art. 6). It was sufficient, but only ‘effective’ (*efficacia*) for the chosen ones (Rejection VI).

The fact that many thus do believe, as has been highlighted in the first main point, is ‘solely from God’s grace’ (*sola Dei gratia*) given to them in Christ ‘from eternity’ (*ab æterno*) (Art. 7, Rejection IV). Dordt thus again links what Christ has done to the ‘very gracious will and intention’ (*gratiosissima voluntas atque intentio*) of God the Father in line with the structure of God as described above. It was the Father that gave the chosen to him to ‘effectively’ (*efficaciter*) save (Art. 8, Rejection III). In fact, it is God’s ‘fixed and definite plan’ (*certo ac definito consilio*) (Rejection I), emanating from his ‘eternal love for his chosen ones’, (*æterno erga electos amore*) that has been ‘carried out’ (*impletum*) (Art. 9, Rejection VII).

The third and fourth main doctrine on *human corruption, conversion to God and the way it occurs* again starts with sin, with ‘blindness, terrible darkness, futility, distortion of judgement in their minds, perversity, defiance, hardness in their hearts and wills, impurity in all their emotions’ (*cœcitatem, horribiles tenebras, vanitatem, ac perversitatem iudicii in mente, malitiam, rebellionem, ac duriem in voluntate et corde, impuritatem denique in omnibus affectibus contraxit*); in short, with total corruption (Art. 1, 2, Rejection IV). This corruption of people spread and therefore all are ‘inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin’ (*propensi ad malum, in peccatis mortui, et peccati servi*) (Art. 3, Rejection I).

They are trapped in a total inability that distorts even ‘a certain light of nature’ (*lumen aliquod naturæ*) that remains in people (Art. 4, Rejection III). This inability is also highlighted in terms of the law which merely exposes ‘the magnitude of sin’ (*magnitudinem ... peccati*) (Art. 5). What neither the light of nature nor the law is able to do (Rejection V), God, who ‘does not owe this grace to anyone’ (*gratiam ... nemini debet*) (Art.

15), does through the 'grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit' (*Spiritus Sancti regenerantis gratia*) (Art. 3), and through 'the power of the Holy Spirit' (*Spiritus Sancti virtute*) (Art. 6).

It is God who 'calls' (*vocantur*) the many through the good news (Art. 8, Rejection V) and it is he, not people and their 'free choice' (*liberum arbitrium*) (Art. 9, Rejection III), who 'works true conversion in them' (*veram in iis conversionem operatur*) (Art. 10, 11) through the Spirit (Rejection VI). This means that he, in a 'supernatural' manner (*supernaturalis*) (Art. 12, 13, 17, Rejection VII), 'illuminates' them (*illuminat*) so that they can 'understand and discern' (*intelligant et dijudicent*). He 'infuses them with new qualities' (*novas qualitates infundit*), 'activating them' and allowing them to 'bear fruits of good deeds' (*fructus bonarum actionum proferre possit*) (Art. 11, 16, Rejection VIII). Dortd describes this as a 'most powerful and most pleasing, a marvellous, hidden, and inexpressible work' (*potentissima simul et suavissima, mirabilis, arcana, et ineffabilis operatio*) (Art. 12).

It is all 'done' by God (*efficiat*) who 'bestowed, breathed and infused' (*conferatur, inspiretur, et infundatur*) it into them (Art. 14, Rejection IX). Also, what the Spirit does is thus linked to God and the 'mystery of his will' (*voluntatis suæ mysterium Deus*), which he made manifest through his 'free and good pleasure and undeserved love' (*in liberrimo beneplacito, et gratuita dilectione*) (Art. 7, 17).

In line with the first, second, third and fourth, the fifth main point on *the perseverance of the saints* starts with sin. Those who have been called by God into fellowship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit are not entirely unbound 'from the body of sin' (*corpore peccati*) (Art. 1). It is because of these 'sins of infirmity' (*infirmittatis peccata*) that they would 'perish and be dislodged' (*pereat ... excutiatur*) if left to their own (Art. 2, 4, 5, 7).

They are therefore continually urged towards what could be described as the triune God who is 'rich in mercy' (*qui dives est misericordia*) (Art. 6). He 'mercifully confirms' (*misericorditer confirmat*) them 'to the end' (*ad finem*) in the grace that he once conferred on them (Art. 3, Rejection I). God does not 'take his Holy Spirit from his own completely' (*Spiritus Sanctum ... a suis non prorsus aufert*) (Art. 6). In fact, with God it cannot possibly happen that they are taken from his own (Art. 8, Rejection III).

This is the case, as his plan cannot 'be changed' (*mutare*), his promise cannot 'fail' (*excidere*), his purpose cannot 'be revoked' (*revocari*) (Art. 8, 10, Rejection II). What God has done through Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit cannot be 'nullified' (*irrita reddi*), 'invalidated' (*frustranea*) or 'wiped out' (*deleri*) (Art. 8, 9, Rejection IV). In fact, it is in and through

Jesus Christ (Art. 8, Rejection IX) and the Holy Spirit that they have this 'assurance of the preservation' (*perseverantiæ certitudinem*) (Art. 11, 12, Rejection V, VIII).

This is their 'incentive' (*stimulus*) to godliness (Art. 12, 13, 14, Rejection VI, VII).

He does not 'let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption' (*nec eousque eos prolabi sinit, ut gratia adoptionis*) (Art. 6). This is their comfort, their 'well founded comfort' (*solido ... solatio*), that they are 'children and heirs' (*filios et hæredes*) of the 'Father of all comfort' (*Pater omnis consolationis*) (Art. 10); in fact, of God 'the Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (*Patri, Filio, et Spiritui Sancto*) (Art. 15).

#### 4. Preliminary conclusion

*The Canons of Dordt* and its mere inherent doctrine of the Trinity in many ways clearly reflects the historical period it was written in.<sup>23</sup>

It reflects at least the structure of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God as influenced by, inter alia, a type of scholasticism as described above. It is, however, precisely in this manner – structured in many ways by causality, negation and eminence – that the *Canons* have been said to be lacking in terms of a doctrine of the Trinity. Despite the fact that the actions of the divine persons are God's actions and that it is not always possible to distinguish the particular actions attributed the divine persons in the structure of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God, it is precisely this ambiguity with regard to the Tri-unity that causes this lacking with regard to the Trinity.

In *Bevrydende waarheid*, Jonker (1994:147) argues, for example, that a broader conceptualisation of the Trinitarian understanding of predestination – that God the Father elects in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit – would have assisted the *Canons* in drawing predestination out of what he described as abstract structures.<sup>24</sup> According to him, a broader Trinitarian understanding would have allowed the eternal predestination to be conceptualised in time; *there* where people are called. For him, at least today, it is therefore important to think of predestination or election as a reality and not as an eternal decision. The decision of God is not to be

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23 Compare in this regard González (2010), Moser, Selderhuis and Sinnema (2014), and Wielenga (2015).

24 For an in-depth discussion of the meaning of election in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in Dordt's *Wirkungsgeschichte*, compare Graafland's research (1987) on the doctrine of election from Calvin to Barth.



thought of as an abstract plan made in the past, but rather as the *living God* himself.

The importance of his comments is highlighted in the last chapter of Berkouwer's book on *Divine Election* (1960). He refers to the great misconception whereby human beings 'take their election for granted'. A misconception of election arises, he argues, when it is 'accepted as a matter of course and it is no longer seen as truly free, sovereign, and gracious' (1960:307). Election, in fact, 'cannot be more seriously misinterpreted' when, abstracted from the grace of God, it changes into a 'self-distinction' that places *us* over and against *them*.

Likewise, also the *question* about the Trinity in *The Canons of Dordt* can therefore be greatly misinterpreted when it is loosened not only from the questions it wanted to answer in the first place, but also from the way in which it wanted to answer these questions.

Perhaps a manner in which the great misconception Berkouwer refers to can be avoided is *to avert a partitioning between the message of Dordt and its inherent comforting character*. This, in fact, is the way Jonker (1989:13), who was one of Berkouwer's students, begins his *Uit vrye guns alleen*. Election, he writes, is [distinguished by] *genadewoorde* [words of grace]. In fact, they articulate the undeserved grace of God.<sup>25</sup>

As an epigraph, he therefore elicits Bavinck (2004:402) who, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, highlighted that it is because of grace that 'even the most unworthy and degraded human being ... is an object of God's eternal love'. For him, in fact, 'no one has a right to believe that he [sic] is lost, for everyone is sincerely and urgently called'. It is precisely because of this being called that 'there is hope even for the most wretched', and that 'we may not, cannot, and do not believe that anyone is lost and not the object of God's eternal love'. This, he writes, is true even and precisely of

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25 Jonker (1989:13) writes: *Uitverkiezing ... is genadewoorde. Hulle gee uitdrukking aan die onverdiende guns, liefde en trou van God. In 'n situasie wat deur sonde, skuld en verloretheid gestempel word, praat hulle van Gods onbegryplike goedheid. Daarom is die konteks waarin hierdie begrippe in die Bybel gebruik word, dié van lofprijsing en dankbaarheid.* [Election ... is words of grace. They give expression to undeserved favour, love and faith of God. In a situation characterised by sin, guilt and being lost, they express God's incomprehensible goodness. Therefore, the context in which these concepts are used in the Bible – is a context of doxology and gratitude.] (1989:13) [author's own translation].



‘the most wretched in our eyes’.<sup>26</sup> He can therefore emphasise that the doctrine of election is a source of ‘inexpressibly great comfort’.<sup>27</sup>

This inexpressibility, of course, is expressed in *The Canons of Dordt* and it is in light thereof – conscious of the mentioned misconception – that the inherent doctrine of the Trinity in *The Canons of Dordt* is to be conceptualised *today*.<sup>28</sup>

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26 Van Zyl (2004) therefore chooses to view the Canons of Dordt as a creed of complete comfort. According to him, ‘all four the subdivisions of the Canons of Dordt give witness to the complete comfort of God’s grace’. It does this, he says, by showing that: an alterable election would imply an uncertain comfort, that an election based on a decision of faith would imply a conditional comfort, that if the election needs to be supplemented by the general grace it would imply an insufficient comfort and that a call to continuous responsibility would imply a short-lived comfort. (p. 127) He writes: *Die sensitiviteit van die leer van die uitverkiesing en die gevaar dat dit baie hard kan klink, is deur die opstellers van die DL besef. Daarom benader hulle hierdie leer doelbewus vanuit ‘n pastorale perspektief waarin die troos wat dit aan gelowiges bied, beklemtoon word. Voortdurend waarsku die DL teen onnodige spekulاسie wat geen pastorale nut het nie.* [The drafters of the Canons of Dordt realised the sensitivity of the doctrine of election and the danger that it might sound hard. They therefore deliberately approached the doctrine from a pastoral perspective where the comfort that it provides to believers are accentuated. The Canons constantly warns against unnecessary speculation without pastoral benefit.] [authors own translation] and reiterates: *Die uitverkiesing is juis ‘n ware troos vir hulle en geen spekulatiewe leer wat hulle in onsekerheid moet dompel nie.* [Election is a sure comfort for them and not a speculative doctrine that plunges them into uncertainty.] (van Zyl 129) [author’s own translation]

27 Dirkie Smit recently chose these words of Bavinck, namely that there is ‘hope for even the most wretched’ as the theme of his retirement lecture held in October 2017 in Stellenbosch. He also used these words as the title of the Warfield lectures which he delivered in March 2018 in Princeton. It is because of the ‘problematic ways in which they (the Canons of Dordt) spoke and argued’, he says, that it is necessary to rather speak of the ‘deepest intention of the Synod of Dordt’ (Smit 2018a). It is necessary to read also the confessional tradition against ‘their own reception histories’ (Smit 2018b) to be able to hear anew this comfort of which Bavinck spoke.

28 It is interesting that Welker (2006:36) also chooses to link the doctrine of the Trinity to comfort. In contrast to an ultimate lack of comfort: *‘die Trinitätslehre soll vielmehr helfen, den langen Atem des Glaubens zu verstehen und zu bewahren inmitten der Erfahrungen zerstörerischer Sinnlosigkeit und ‘Zweckwidrigkeit’ in dieser Welt.* [The doctrine of the Trinity will rather help to understand and sustain the long breath of faith in the midst of experiences of destructive meaninglessness and a senseless lack of purpose in this world.] [author’s own translation].

## The Trinity in the Confession of Belhar (1982 AD)<sup>1</sup>

Piet Naudé

1. Introducing the project: 'Toward the common expression of the one faith today'

The important issue of some agreement on the 'essentials' of the Christian faith has been part of the modern ecumenical movement from its beginning. The first World Conference on Faith and Order (F&O) in Lausanne (1927) included 'The church's common confession of faith' in its agenda and was able to confirm: 'We are united in the Christian Faith which is contained in the Holy Scriptures and is witnessed to and safeguarded in the Ecumenical Creed, commonly called the Nicene, and in the Apostles' Creed, which Faith has been continuously confirmed in the spiritual experience of the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.'<sup>2</sup> With the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 in Amsterdam, 'the visible unity of the church *in one faith* and in one eucharistic fellowship' emerged as the ultimate aim of the new organisation (WCC Constitution III, I, my emphasis).

The question of what this 'one faith' exactly is, and how to reach unity in 'one eucharistic fellowship' were two themes continuously addressed in subsequent years. The latter was taken up in the well-known BEM-project,<sup>3</sup> while the first developed broadly as follows: The fourth F&O World Conference in Montreal (1963) took up the very important question of how Scripture relates to Tradition (capital T) and traditions (small t) as well as the place of the creeds in such a hermeneutical framework. An

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1 Paper read at the Fifth Ecumenical Forum held under auspices of the Ecumenical Institute at the University of Heidelberg on 11 January 2003. I herewith give recognition and thanks to the director, Prof Christoph Schwöbel, for the invitation, and to Dr Fernando Enns, Study Leader at the Institute, for our discussion of the theme.

2 Resolution 2 of the report on section IV, first draft, as published in the proceedings (see Bate 1928:230–231).

3 See Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982–1990, F&O Paper 149, Geneva: WCC, 1990.

intensive study of the early church and its councils followed, investigating the possibilities of a genuinely Universal Council in modern times. But by 1967, the F&O Commission Meeting judged that such efforts and studies toward a common confession was premature, and in 1971 (at Louvain) shifted the focus rather to a contextual pluralism of credal witnesses and of accounts of hope.<sup>4</sup> This culminated in the Bangalore (1978) statement 'A common statement of our faith' (FO Paper 92, 1978:244–246) where a number of important affirmations about the Trinitarian faith<sup>5</sup> were made, including the search for a common confession of the shared apostolic faith.<sup>6</sup>

The search for such common confession was outlined in a three-stage study initiated at the Lima Commission meeting in 1982 under the title 'Towards the common expression of the apostolic faith today'. The three interdependent goals were: (1) A recognition of the Nicene Creed (without the *filioque*) as the ecumenical creed of the church; (2) an explanation of the creed for the sake of contemporary understanding; and (3) finding ways to an expression of the common faith today. The sixth assembly of the WCC in Vancouver (1983) affirmed the study project, which included contemporary expressions of faith, as well as a focus on the Nicene creed as the most striking model of unity in the early church, representing part of a *consensio antiquitatis et universitatis* (Sieben 1979:515). The possibility of Nicea as an expression of the common apostolic faith was pursued at a number of theological consultations (see Limouris 1991a:108–110), which led to the publication of a draft document *Confessing the one faith* (F&O paper 140, 1987) approved by the Standing Commission of the F&O in Madrid (1987). After considerable reactions and further deliberations around the world, the new revised version was approved in Dunblane, Scotland (1990) and published in 1991 by the WCC as Faith and Order Paper 153 under the title: *Confessing the one faith. An ecumenical explication of the Apostolic faith as it is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* (381).

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4 See the section 'Giving account of the hope that is in us' (Louvain, F&O Paper 59:215–216) where it is stated: 'What we have in mind is not to take the form of a Creed, a Catechism, a statement of Confession or a kind of theological handbook. We should endeavour to express what is the content and meaning of our life and prayer and proclamation.' This later led to the publication of the four-part series *Confessing our faith around the world* published between 1980 and 1985 (Faith and Order Papers 104, 120, 123, and 126).

5 As example of the many Trinitarian passages: 'We confess God's involvement in the history of humankind, revealed through Israel, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, communicated to us by the Holy Spirit, into which fulfilment all humanity is called' (246).

6 See specifically the preamble on pages 244–245.

My interpretation of the common confession-project is that it has retained a bi-focal vision of both recognition and explanation of the Nicene Creed and promotes '... new confessions of faith as they are provoked today by situations of persecution, of church union negotiations, or of urgent socio-economic, political or ideological threats'. Such modern confessions '... could enrich the variety of credal expressions and ought to be communicated within the ecumenical community as concrete evidence that we are "listening to what the Spirit has to say to the churches"' (Houtepen 1991:197). Instead of considering such new expressions of faith as purely contextualist reactions to specific circumstances,<sup>7</sup> they should be part and parcel of our theological task to show the coherence between 'universally received' symbols (such as Nicea or the Apostolicum) and such modern expressions, in order to confirm our one apostolic faith.

At this point it should be noted that the primary expression of the apostolic faith<sup>8</sup> as 'the dynamic reality of the Christian faith'<sup>9</sup> remains the Holy Scriptures. Different traditions arose, however, in the process of confession in post-biblical times with concomitant different views on the nature and authority of such confessions. Today the ecumenical church encompasses these views and their numerous internal variations from the distinct authority of select Ecumenical Councils, historically definitive confessions (Lutheran), and openness to new confessions in new circumstances (Reformed), to non-credal (Methodist) and even anti-credal churches (Pentecost, charismatic).

For this paper I take the Reformed view of confessions as point of departure. This is, first, the tradition from which I engage in ecumenical theology, and second, the context from which the Belhar confession grew. From a Reformed perspective, three remarks are necessary as background to this discussion:

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7 In his overview of confessions as communicative acts, Edmund Arens (1989) moves from *Lehrendes Bekennen* in the Councils and *Bekennnisschriften* in the Reformation to what he calls *Situatives Bekennen* to depict twentieth century documents like Barmen (and by implication Belhar). The latter creates the unfortunate impression that the early creeds and confessions were 'universal' (in the sense of a-contextual) and not in fact also situation-bound.

8 See George Vandervelde's discussion of at least six dimensions to the meaning of 'apostolic faith' in the context of the WCC. He indicates that one such dimension relates to the Nicene Creed '...as the ecumenical symbol i.e. confessional document *par excellence*' (1998:25, point 5).

9 See the introduction to *Confessing the one faith* (page 2, par 7) that tries to avoid the idea that *apostolic faith* refers 'to a single fixed formula' or 'to a specific moment in Christian history'.

1. Scripture retains its position of ultimate criterion, the *norma normans* of faith, so that all subsequent expressions of faith are *under* Scripture and not next to it.
2. The symbols of the early church – notably the Nicene creed, the Apostolicum and the credo of Athanasius – are accepted with the confessions arising from the Protestant Reformation<sup>10</sup> as being in agreement with Scripture (*quia*), and therefore as authoritative expressions of the apostolic faith.
3. In the light of its understanding of the church's witnessing role to the Word in new circumstances and against new heresies (*semper reformanda*), Reformed churches are open to continual and renewed confessions of faith, albeit subject to certain broad constraints.<sup>11</sup>

An exploration of the apostolic faith as found in a new confession such as Belhar in relation to earlier expressions of faith such as Nicea therefore finds its inspiration both in the specifics of the *Confessing the one faith-*

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10 In the Reformed churches of Dutch origin, the Three Formulae of Unity, i.e. the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dordt, occupy a pre-eminent position.

11 Karl Barth has been very influential in shaping the notion of confession. Already in 1925 he spoke to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches on the desirability and possibility of a general Reformed confession (the formulation of which he denied at the time). At that occasion he defined as follows: 'A reformed creed is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by the Christian community within a geographically limited area, which, until further action, defines its character to outsiders; and which, until further action, gives guidance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian Church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures' (English version published as *Theology and church. Shorter writings 1920–1928*, see pp 132–133). Barth's other definition in the KD I/2:693ff, in context of his discussion of the doctrine of God's Word, reads: 'Eine kirchliche Konfession ist eine auf Grund gemeinsamer Beratung und Entschliessung zustande gekommene Formulierung und Proklamation der der Kirche in bestimmtem Umkreise gegebenen Einsicht in die von der Schrift bezeugte Offenbarung.' And a third discussion is found in KD III/4:79–94 where Barth, drawing on his earlier work, puts forward four criteria for a confession: 1. It has no ulterior motive, because 'es wird allein zu Ehre Gottes geschehen dürfen' (84). 2. It reacts to a moment when the faith is acutely questioned from inside or outside. '*Der status confessionis* ist also kein Dauerzustand' (86). 3. Confession is a communal act of the church and not a private matter. 'Ein echter Bekenner wird sich niemals als Solist und auch nicht als Kammermusiker gebärden und verhalten' (90). 4. Confession is a free act as it responds to God's free grace. Therefore nobody can be coerced into confession. 'Wer mit seinem Bekenntnis ins Offene geht... betritt eine Bergspitze, über der nur noch der Himmel ist' (93).

project and in the Reformed habit of testing later expressions of faith in the light of earlier ones (representing an accumulated faith tradition), and ultimately in the light of Scripture. In the spirit of the Confessing-project,<sup>12</sup> this paper will take the Nicean text as point of departure and do a comparative reading with the Belhar text, showing both similarities and differences, but with the overriding question in mind: Does Belhar confirm the apostolic faith as expressed in Nicea?<sup>13</sup>

The intention is twofold: This is a contribution to the first phase of explicating Nicea as confessing the one faith is undertaken in subsection II of each article. But it is also a contribution to communicating the faith of Belhar to the ecumenical church,<sup>14</sup> and in turn, testing this faith in the light of the most ecumenically accepted of all symbols.

Before we venture into a close reading of the respective texts, a few interesting, but hermeneutically significant, remarks about Nicea and Belhar are made,<sup>15</sup> keeping in mind the fact that the audience of this paper

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12 For a critical view of the Confessing-project from the realities of South African church divisions (and perhaps missing the ecumenical spirit?), see Naude 2002.

13 There could obviously be a variation of answers to this question: Belhar could confirm the basic theological convictions of Nicea, or deny some of these. Or Belhar supersedes Nicea to confirm aspects of our common faith not testified to in Nicea. Or these 'new elements' – if any – are not recognised as belonging to our common faith, but is collectively a mere contextual witness in a crisis situation. And so one can continue with various scenarios. The focus of this paper is quite narrow and specific and will mainly address the issue of consonance between Nicea and Belhar with the former taken as point of departure. I take theological resonance (as in the title of this paper) to mean at least a significant theological convergence, and not merely textual agreements or differences.

14 Anton Houtepen's reference (1991:197) to an ecumenical 'Book of Confessions' as 'an enriching possibility for dialogue and exchange of spiritual experiences' could therefore include Belhar as example of confessions from around the world (see footnote 233 above).

15 I am no Patristic scholar and have for Nicea's history and context relied on the following very informative secondary sources: Limouris 1991b (short orientation), Hauschild 1994 (on the text), Ritter 1978 (on Arianism), Perrone 1993 and Ritter 1999 (general history and theology) and the well-known classics by Sieben 1979 (on the Councils) and Kelly 1972 (on the early creeds). The best South African source is, as far as I know, WD Jonker's Christology, *Christus die Middelaar*, published in 1977, specifically pages 12–61. For Belhar fewer formal academic sources are available, although the list is growing. At this stage the most useful introductory source remains *A moment of truth*, edited by Cloete and Smit, and published in 1984 after the draft confession of Belhar was accepted in 1982. A layman's introduction in Afrikaans has been attempted by Botha and Naude 1998.

will be fairly well informed about Nicea, but perhaps less so with regard to Belhar.

## 2. Nicea and Belhar: Creating a hermeneutical basis for a text comparison

### 2.1 What is in a name?

Both Nicea and Belhar derive their names from the places where they were formulated, and in both cases there is indeed a lot in the name. In the case of Nicea, the full name Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (NC)<sup>16</sup> points to the complexity of its formation over an extended period from the first ecumenical council held in the city of Nicea (325) and its fuller and altered version as accepted by the second council in Constantinople (May to July 381). We will return to this complexity below, but wish at this stage to direct attention to the fact that both Councils were called by the Roman emperor<sup>17</sup> (Constantine in the case of Nicea and Eusebius in the case of Constantinople)<sup>18</sup> and bore great political significance in ensuring religious unity for the sake of imperial unity.<sup>19</sup> In the view of the Romans, the ruler carried responsibility for religious matters. 'This view of the ruler as *pontifex maximus* was retained in Christianity and determined its view

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16 In this paper I will follow the custom of referring to the 381-document as NC, or as the Nicene Creed, whereas Nicea will refer to the earlier version of 325.

17 The first emperor's council already occurred in Arles in 314 to solve the problem of bishop Cecilian's election as bishop of Karthago (see Perrone 1993:26). As it was a meeting of bishops in the West only, it does not have the status of an ecumenical council.

18 After he defeated Licinius in 324, Constantine ruled over the whole empire until his death in 337. Theodosius I ruled in the West from 379, but after the murder of Gratian, he also ruled over the whole empire until 395.

19 In Nicea the emperor hosted the Council in his palace, paid for part of the cost, chaired the meeting, and closed the Council with a grand banquet which served as 20th commemoration of his rule. In Constantinople, the Council was called by the emperor, but met in a church and was chaired by bishops, first Melitius (who died at the Council) followed by Gregorius of Nazianzus and later Nectarius of Constantinople. In both cases the decisions of the Councils were enacted by imperial law as well as canon law. See Perrone 1993:33,56, 71–72. See Max Stackhouse's suggests that we see in this relation between *ecclesia* and *imperium* '...the fundamental issue of what could hold diverse, conflict-ridden, proto-cosmopolitan societies together' by asserting the truth of 'metaphysical-moral ideas' underlying any effort to build a society – even up to today. He commends the fathers for resisting the efforts to sanctify the status of the emperor (Stackhouse 1989:185).



of the kingdom for centuries to come' (Perrone 1993:27, my translation). In this light, it would therefore be seen as the duty of the emperor to participate in and influence ecclesial matters on the assumption of a unity between church and state only questioned and abolished in modern times.

The two names reflected in the Nicene Creed thus point to its close alignment with the political power of the day and the strategic<sup>20</sup> importance of the councils *per se* as representing the common view of the churches in both the West and the East. The confession of Belhar takes its name from a fairly humble so-called 'coloured' suburb near Cape Town. Under apartheid rule, political power was represented by Cape Town, the seat of legislative power where, over the period from 1948 and onwards, South African society was segregated in every respect on racial grounds. Belhar, as a physical space, was in itself a result of the infamous Group Areas Act that dispossessed 'non-whites' of land and grouped them in segregated black, coloured and Indian residential areas and townships (informal settlements). Belhar as ecclesial space also represented separation, because the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, which gathered in its general synod at Belhar in 1982 (22 September to 6 October),<sup>21</sup> was formed in 1881 as the result of the establishment of separate churches<sup>22</sup> for different race groups within the Dutch Reformed Church (which was itself established in Cape Town as a result of the Dutch settlement in 1652).

In contrast to Nicea, which spoke from and for the 'centre' in a situation of political and ecclesial unity, Belhar spoke from the margins, and represented both political and ecclesial schism. But this does not imply that Belhar at the time represented weakness or political insignificance. The reason for this is twofold.

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20 It seems as if Constantine had the city of Ancyra in Galatia in mind for the first council. He changed the venue to Nicea as gesture of compromise to the Aryans who might have felt wary of the outspoken anti-Aryanism of the bishop of Ancyra. See Perrone 1993:33.

21 The draft confession was accepted on the last day of the synod, Wednesday 6 October 1982. For a moving account of events at the synod, see Johan Botha's narrative in Botha and Naude 1998:33–37.

22 The other two churches are the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA, black church) and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA, Indian church) who together with the DRC (white church) and DRMC form the DRC-family of Reformed churches. The white Reformed community is divided into three further churches: The Gereformeerde Kerk, the Hervormde Kerk (both from the late nineteenth century and reacting to events in The Netherlands) and the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (APK) which split off from the DRC when the latter church started to move away from a theological support for apartheid after 1986.

First: Although South Africa, after the formation of the Union in 1910, *de jure* accepted a separation of church and state, the close-knit relationship between party, church, culture and *volk* (the people) in Afrikaner nationalism constituted a *de facto corpus Christianum* after the National Party came to power in 1948. In fact, the very idea of apartheid as a political system had part of its roots in a specific brand of neo-Calvinist (Abraham Kuyper) and missiological thinking (Gustav Warneck), and some of the apartheid laws were enacted at the request of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) (for example, prohibition of mixed-race marriages). The whole system of white South Africa, solidified by the formation of the Republic in 1961 under Hendrik Verwoerd, constituted a close-knit unity that lived off religion for its moral legitimacy.<sup>23</sup>

Thus: the common and unquestioned assumption of both defenders and opponents of apartheid was that the church really matters.<sup>24</sup> The sociopolitical system of apartheid was interpreted theologically, and the theological (ecclesiological) struggle was not about interesting theoretical ideas, but about liberation or continued oppression. In this sense, the voice of Belhar was of great political significance. Although spoken from Belhar, the words fell right in Cape Town, where the rulers knew that the legitimacy of their system was at stake.

Second: The voice of Belhar was influential and powerful, because it was not a voice calling from the wilderness, but from the very heart of the ecumenical church. The involvement of the broader church in the South African struggle does not need to be repeated here. In a recent paper<sup>25</sup> on Belhar's antecedent witnesses, I showed how Catholic, Lutheran, Black, Reformed and ecumenical declarations from 1948 to 1982 came together in the draft confession (1982) as an ultimate form of Christian witness *against* irreconcilability and *for* the unity in Christ.

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23 For a very good overview of apartheid as a theology, see the well-known books by De Gruchy 1979 (English) and Kinghorn 1986 (Afrikaans), and my recent attempt to summarise the roots of apartheid theology, Naude 2002 (submitted for possible publication in 2003 in *Missionalia*, an international missiological journal based in South Africa)

24 For a discussion and original sources, see Naude 2001.

25 The paper, written for a seminar on Barmen and Belhar at the University of Heidelberg (Germany) in the winter-semester of 2002, is entitled: *The theological coherence between the Belhar confession and some antecedent church witnesses in the period 1948 –1982*. (Naude 2002b). It has been submitted for possible publication in 2003 by *Verbum et Ecclesia*, a South African theological journal.

## 2.2 What is in a heresy?

From the earliest church, creeds and confessions normally had the double aim of being a summary of the true faith for baptismal or catechetical purposes, and a contra-statement against some form of heterodoxy. In both Nicea and Belhar the content has been deeply influenced by that which they were set up against. Although Nicea is a creed and Belhar a *Bekennntnisschrift*, and they therefore belong to slightly different ecclesial and liturgical genres, both texts are characterised by the structure of 'true faith' and 'heresy'.<sup>26</sup>

In Belhar, this is quite evident from the fact that the three middle articles all end with a 'Therefore, we reject...' – clause wherein the specific dimension of the false doctrine is clearly exposed in the light of the preceding positive statement of the gospel: Article 2 rejects any doctrine that would endanger the visible unity of the church; article 3 rejects any doctrine which sanctions forced racial separation in the name of the gospel and therefore denies the reconciliation in Christ; article 4 rejects any ideology which legitimises societal injustice and a doctrine which would be unwilling to resist such injustices. From these rejections, the middle structure of Belhar, that is, unity, reconciliation and justice, naturally flows, 'encircled' by the articulation of faith in the triune God (article 1) and the call to obedience (article 5).

In Nicea the situation is, for historical reasons, more complex. The original text of Nicea 325 is much shorter than the version of NC 381 known to us today.<sup>27</sup> What is interesting to note is that the shorter version included as part of the main text a clear rejection clause (*anathema*),<sup>28</sup> whereas the final version has no explicit rejection clauses, but is built on implicit rejections<sup>29</sup> incorporated into the main text. It is generally accepted in scholarship that Nicea 325 was primarily directed against

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26 Karl Barth (1948:704) clarifies this point by emphasising that if you cannot see the No! of a confession, the credo of the Yes! remains silent.

27 Nicea has 141 words which includes the anathema of 42 words, and has no amen, whereas NC consists of 174 words plus the Amen. For a detailed analysis of the two versions and comparisons, see Hauschild's article in the TRE (1994:444–456).

28 The rejection clause refers explicitly to two quotations drawn from Arian theology and is concerned with the second person of the Trinity: *hn pote \ote ouk \hn* (there was a time that he was not) and *prin gennhqena ouk hn* (before he was born he was not). The clause ends with: *toutous anaqhmatizei \h kaqolikh kai apostolokh \ekklhsia* (this the Catholic and Apostolic Churches reject).

29 For a list of these implicit rejections (without discussion) related to the text of NC 381, see Limouris 1991b:727.

the Arian<sup>30</sup> heresy in the context of the early church's search for an adequate expression of Trinitarian theology, and that NC 381 was an extension of the earlier text to address new heresies that had arisen in the meantime and required an extension of the earlier version, with special emphasis on the eighth article, dealing with the Holy Spirit (see Limouris 1991b:727, Perrone 1993:27–31; Hauschild 1994:449–454). Read from the anathema 'backwards', one would therefore expect Nicea 325 and NC 381 to deal with the issue of the Trinity, with specific references to the relation of the Son, that is, the Logos, to the Father, and (in the light of the 'pneumatomachians'<sup>31</sup> later) the question of the divinity of the Spirit, and how the one God could be confessed as a trinity without compromising the unity of God (on the one hand) and the divinity of each of the three persons in the Trinity (on the other).

The way in which the Trinitarian confession of NC and Belhar's five articles relate to one another will hopefully be apparent from the textual analysis below.

### 2.3 What lies in reception?

The process of reception of both NC and Belhar is of historical and theological significance.

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30 Arius (260–337) from Alexandria built his ideas on Hellenistic metaphysics in relation to specifically the Logos-concept (found in the Johannine gospel). To retain the absolute unity and transcendence of God, only God can be the *agennhtos arzh*, so that the Son as Logos must be *ktisma* or *poihma* (creation, something made). The consequence is that the Son cannot be accepted as equally eternal with the Father (like in Origenes): as a created being there was a time when the Son was not. The motive to protect the unity, indivisibility and transcendence of God led to a subordination of the Son. See Adolf Ritter TRE 3, 1978:693–719 for a fuller technical discussion.

31 In the first half of the 4th century the focus of the Arian discussion was on the relation between the Father and the Son. Therefore Nicea 325 has an extended confession on Jesus Christ, mostly retained in 381, but with a very short confession about the Spirit: And (we believe) in the Holy Spirit (*kai /eis ton agion pneuma*). In NC 381 it is this article that is expanded significantly to address the heresy that the Spirit is not equally divine in relation to the other two Persons in the Trinity. This heresy (named after the pneumatomachians, meaning 'spirit-fighters') is mentioned the first time in 360 by Athanasius and apparently arose in Egypt with support from Macedonius of Constantinople (therefore sometimes called the Macedonian heresy). See Perrone 1993:66–68.

In the case of NC, the process of reception<sup>32</sup> was in fact constitutive for the final formulation itself. In the period between 325 and 381 the faith of Nicea was carried forth in both the East and the West and in the end found to be an inadequate expression of the faith. What is even more remarkable is the fact that no documentary evidence from the 381 Council itself suggests that NC was formulated and accepted in Constantinople. We have confirmation of this only via the reception of NC at the next Councils of Ephesus in 431 and specifically of Chalcedon in 451, which refers to the 150 fathers' acceptance of the NC-creed in 381 (Perrone 1993:81).<sup>33</sup> One further textual change occurred after 381 with the insertion of *filioque*<sup>34</sup> by the West between the 7th and the 9th century (which contributed to the eventual split between the East and the West). But the creed is attested to in liturgies as early as 488 and is accepted in both the East and the West as an expression of true faith. The churches of the Reformation – both Lutheran and Reformed – accepted the NC as the basis for faith, although its liturgical use has been superseded by the Apostolicum. The WCC process of *Confessing the one faith* therefore rightly builds on the most ecumenical of all Christian symbols.

The confession of Belhar was accepted as a draft confession at the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) on 6 October 1982. It was subsequently distributed to all congregations of the DRMC for comment and formally accepted as the fourth *Bekennnisschrift* at the synod of 1986. Its reception has since then gone through a variety of phases: First, it was accepted internally by the members of the DRMC<sup>35</sup> as

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32 For a discussion of the technical meaning of reception in the ecumenical movement and a comprehensive bibliography up to 1998, see Naude and Smit 2000.

33 It is interesting to note that, according to Perrone, the Council of Ephesus' decision on 22 July 431 to declare NC as adequate and only expression of the faith, must not be interpreted as if new symbols of faith could not later be accepted. 'Nicea was accepted as highest norm and criterion of faith without excluding the further development of creeds' (Perrone 1993:81, my translation).

34 The recently published *Habilitationsschrift* on the *filioque* by Bernd Oberdorfer (2000), now professor at Augsburg, is a comprehensive treatment of the struggle about the procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son. I find the view of Max Stackhouse (1989:182, 196) illuminating from a non-credal perspective, as he suggests that the omission of the *filioque* actually opens the opportunity to see the work in the Spirit in both Judaism and other religions where Christ is not acknowledged as Lord and Son of God.

35 At the 1986-synod 10 of the 267 congregations voiced their concerns with Belhar, and 24 of the 498 delegates did not sign the confession at first. See Smit 1998:26.

the expression of their faith in a situation of oppression that constituted a *status confessionis*. Secondly, it was accepted as the basis of faith in the unification of the DRMC and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) into the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) on 14 April 1994.<sup>36</sup> Thirdly, Belhar was accepted or noted by a number of churches outside<sup>37</sup> South Africa, such as the Verenigde Protestantse Kerk in Belgium,<sup>38</sup> the Evangelisch Reformierten Kirche in Bayern und Nordwestdeutschland and the Reformierten Bund in Germany, as well as by the Reformed Ecumenical Council (from which the URCSA has withdrawn). Fourthly, Belhar has been and will form part of the re-unification processes of the DRC-family.<sup>39</sup>

Whereas the URCSA is in principle open to a textual reformulation in the light of ‘a better understanding of the Word of God’<sup>40</sup> (church order art 2, my translation), the chances for this are fairly slim. The period to negotiate Belhar’s actual content in the process of the DRC family re-union has in my judgement been passed. We shall have to find a way to make Belhar part of the new church as part of the confessional basis brought into the process by the URCSA. Furthermore, the history of the Reformed confessions teaches us that a confession’s formulation – even if later seen as inadequate or even factually wrong – is retained, not so much for what it confesses, but for what it intends to confess. In extreme situations a synod could accept an authoritative explication of such a confession

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36 Some congregations of the DRCA did not join the re-unification and remains legally as separate church until this day.

37 In discussing the legacy of Abraham Kuyper, one of the leaders of the URCSA, Russel Botman (2000:346), attempts to show convergence between Belhar and some liberative trends in Kuyper’s thought. He then notes with frustration: ‘Why this first Reformed confession conceived on African soil received so little, if any, attention from Reformed churches internationally, and particularly among Kuyperians and Barthian scholars, remains a mystery.’

38 This church included Belhar in its church orders in 1998. For an overview and informative discussion, see *De belijdenis van Belhar* published by the Verenigde Protestantse Kerk in Belgium (2001). The German churches mentioned above included Belhar in the official partnership documents between themselves and the URCSA.

39 For a discussion of the DRC’s reaction to Belhar, see Naude 1997 (Afrikaans). I have taken this matter further in *Reformed confessions as hermeneutical problem: A case study of the Belhar confession* (Naude 2000, to be published as part of the series on Reformed identity and ecumenicity (editors Michael Welker and Wallace Alston, Eerdmans, 2004).

40 This is quoted from the URCSA’s church orders, article 2 (my translation). The full sentence reads: ‘In the future, changed circumstances as well as a better understanding of God’s Word, may lead to the acceptance of new confessions or the alteration of current confessions.’

to draw certain hermeneutical boundaries for the understanding of a specific formulation.<sup>41</sup>

#### 2.4 Specific text-reception problems

Reception problems<sup>42</sup> regarding the NC-text have been focused on two concepts: *homo-ousios* and *filioque*. This is merely noted, and will not be pursued in this paper. In Belhar, the major debate internal<sup>43</sup> to the DRC-family has been article 4: 'We believe that ... in a world full of injustice and enmity He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged ...' Many saw and still see in this formulation a liberation theological reduction of God's revelation and therefore unacceptable as part of a confession.<sup>44</sup> The formal view of the DRC synod of 1990 is that Belhar, read by itself, does not contradict the Formulas of Unity (point 5 of decision) and that article four could have been formulated differently (point 8). The DRC-leadership has indicated in a letter of 8 November 1996 that, despite article 4, Belhar cannot simply be dismissed as a liberation theological document.<sup>45</sup> What this paper pursues is whether Belhar as a whole is in theological consonance with the Nicene Creed – and to this end article four will obviously be included in the discussion below.

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41 For a discussion and concrete examples, see my contribution in Botha and Naude 1998:85–86.

42 I do not specifically address the very important reception-issue related to gender and language. The report of the Churches of Christ in the USA on NC notes: 'The language and thought categories of the creed (and the fourth century) were formative for the church. Many believed that they have kept women in powerless places and today impede women from hearing the gospel as saving word' (see Heim 1989:201). A 'gendered' reading of both NC and Belhar is an indispensable task which is – as far as I know – still outstanding, although some work by Barabara Zikmund and Susan Thistlethwaite on the trinity and women's experience has been done (for references and discussion, see Stackhouse 1989:168–169).

43 In reading Belhar (Oct–Dec 2002) with an international group of senior students – representing the North and the South, as well as the East and the West – article four created no problems. It was rather the second article on church unity that drew critical discussion. This illustrates that your reaction is hermeneutically determined by your context!

44 Prof JM Vorster of Potchefstroom University argues inter alia: 'The whole revelation of Scripture describes God as God of all people and in a special way the God of the faithful' (1998:478, my translation). See also his article for references in the debate.

45 Apart from the extensive explication of the biblical basis for article 4 by DJ Smit in *A moment of truth* (Cloete and Smit 1984:53–65), I have attempted to refute the perception that Belhar is a liberation theological document (in the negative sense) in my contribution to Botha and Naude 1998:86–89.



## 2.5 Accompanying letters

The issue of reception is made even more interesting if one takes into account that Nicea and the NC as well as Belhar have all been accompanied by a letter<sup>46</sup> to make its content, intention and authority clear. In the case of Nicea, the text has been distributed with a letter to the different synods (Alexandrian letter retained) as well as by a letter written by Constantine to all churches in which he expresses his joy over the restored unity in faith, and declare the Council decisions as law of the state. The Council of 381 sent a letter to emperor Theodosius in which they confirmed the Nicene faith and the restoration of Christian unity, and in which they requested him to confirm the canons and decisions through an edict of the emperor (to which he acceded on 30 July 381).

Where Nicea and the NC can be and have been read and interpreted without these letters, the opposite is the case with Belhar. Here the accompanying letter is part of the hermeneutical key to the confessional text itself. In four paragraphs, the synod clarifies the seriousness of an act of confessions (par 1), explicates their motive (par 2) and the spirit in which the confession is made (par 3), and spells out the aim of reconciliation and unity (par 4). The Belhar letter has been and will be an integral part of the reception process itself and should be taken seriously. (For the sake of the text comparison below, the letter will be taken into account only where deemed necessary.)

## 3. A textual and theological comparison

The aim of this section is not to engage in a text (that is, word by word) comparison, as this is rendered inappropriate by the different genres of the NC and Belhar respectively. But the texts are important, as they obviously act as bearers of theological meaning. The original Greek text of the NC and original Afrikaans text of Belhar will serve as points of departure, but for the sake of a wider readership, will be discussed via authorised English translations.<sup>47</sup> As explained at the outset, the focus is on the possible

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46 This has almost become a 'mark' of creeds and confessions if one takes for example the Belgic Confession and Barmen declaration into account.

47 For NC I follow the text as in *Prayers we have in common* (agreed liturgical texts prepared by the International Consultation on English Texts, 1975) as used by *Confessing the one faith*. For Belhar I use the DRMC official translations into English and German, published by the NG Sendingkerk in 1982 (Huguenot: Paarl Drukpers). For the sake of references to Belhar, I will make use of an unofficial numbering of paragraphs for each of the five articles: Articles 1 and 5 has no subdivisions (unless one reads the doxology of art 5 as a separate paragraph which I will, for reference purposes, not do). The three middle articles are divided into the

theological consonance between the NC and Belhar where the NC serves as point of departure. In some cases the text in itself will be the focal point; in others, the thematic content as carried by the text will be important.

### 3.1 We believe in (*pisteuomen eis* – *ons glo in*)

In contrast to the Apostolicum (*credo in*), both the NC and Belhar take the plural as the subject of confession (we believe ...). Despite the fact that the NC may have partially been built on a baptismal formula, it selects to emphasise the communion of faith which encompasses the individual: inasmuch as the individual's confession is made in communion with the faith of the whole church, so the communal confession articulates the faith of the individual. And despite the precedence of the Apostolicum in the Reformed tradition, one would have expected the plural form in Belhar, because the subject of a confession over and against a heresy is *the church*, which also acts as first recipient of such a confession (see Barth 1948:713, 725).

In the NC, *pisteuomen eis* is repeated four times with reference to the Trinity (once for each Person) and significantly includes the church as the object of confession. In Belhar 'we believe in' occurs twice, but the first includes the Triune God as a unity without separate articles for each of the three Persons, and the second refers to the church. With regard to the latter, Belhar's Afrikaans text follows the Apostolicum, where '*glo in*' is reserved for God and '*glo aan*' is used for the article on the church.<sup>48</sup> As a positive explication of the gospel and true to its nature as *Bekenntnisschrift*, Belhar includes quite a number of 'we believe that'-statements<sup>49</sup> that serve as a mirror image of the 'we reject'-clauses in the three middle articles.

Already in the opening lines we see a double convergence between the NC and Belhar: they both take the confessing church as subject, and both take the Triune God and the church as 'objects' of confession. The

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paragraphs as printed in the Afrikaans and subsequent translations. The only difficulty is in article 2 which starts with a general statement (*We believe in one ... church*) and is then followed by six paragraphs (*We believe that ...*). In this case 2.1–2.6 refer to these explicating paragraphs. Article 3 thus has four paragraphs (3.1–3.4) and article 4 has three (4.1–4.3). The rejections will be linked to the relevant article and cited in order of appearance, e.g. article 2, rejection 2 or, where only one rejection clause appears like in articles 3 and 4, it will be called rejection, article 3 or rejection, article 4.

48 This distinction between *credere in* and *credere is* not possible in English.

49 'We believe that ...' is used six times in art. 2 (unity), four times in art. 3 (reconciliation), three times in art. 4 (justice) and once in art. 5 (obedience).

question now arises whether this points to a deeper thematic consonance. For this we turn first to the confession of the Trinity.

### 3.2 Trinitarian theology as basis for ecclesiology

We have already seen above that Nicea and the NC were formulated in the context of the development of the early church's understanding of the Trinity. One can therefore expect that the Three Persons would be confessed both in their own Personhood, and in their interrelation to one another.

The first that strikes one is the strong emphasis on unity in the Nicene Creed: We believe in one God, ('ena qeon), one Lord ('ena kurion), who is of one being with the Father ('omo-ousios tw patri), the Holy Spirit who with the Father and the Son (sun patri kai \uiw)) is worshipped and glorified; and we believe in one church (mian ekkhlsian). The focal point of the unity is the Trinity as one God (against forms of tritheism) where Father, Son and Spirit are *equally divine* (against forms of subordinism) and from whose grace *the church as one church* is established (against ecclesial division<sup>50</sup> as a result of doctrinal differences).

It is instructive to note that Belhar takes the outcome of the struggle for the church's trinitarian faith as expressed in NC as its very starting point: *We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit*. In this manner Belhar establishes itself on the ecumenical faith of the church through the ages. The unity of God – so eloquently expressed in the NC – is taken up in the very last sentence of Belhar: *To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever*. This reminds us strongly of the doxological phrase in the Nicene article on the Holy Spirit: *Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped* (sumproskunoumenon) *and glorified* (sundocazomenon). In both the NC and Belhar, the Trinitarian faith is doxologically and antithetically<sup>51</sup> expressed and, if we read the Belhar phrase in conjunction with the very first line of the confession, it emerges that trinitarianism in fact begins (underlies) and ends (takes forward) the confession itself.

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50 It should again be noted that both Nicea and NC were called by the emperor to heal specific *doctrinal* rifts in the church, although both Councils obviously also dealt with other issues like church governance, appointments of bishops, and many other agenda points.

51 There is little doubt that this doxological formulation in the Nicene Creed is crucial to emphasise the divinity of the Spirit. In Belhar the doxology starts with *Jesus is Lord*, and is imbedded in article 5, where obedience to Jesus Christ is set against obedience to authorities and human laws. See discussion of Lordship of Christ below.

But where the trinitarian faith is – because of the nature of the heresies – itself expounded and defended in NC, *Belhar takes this faith as assumption to shift the focus from the unity of God to the unity of the church*, because the heretical situation against which Belhar witnesses is an ecclesial one of separated churches for people of different racial descent. In Belhar there is therefore a ‘contraction’ of the Nicene Creed so that belief in the triune God is immediately linked to the church in a double movement, each of which confirms the NC in an interesting way.

In article 1 *We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit* is in the same breath followed by *who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as He has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end*. This is in line with the structure of both the NC and the Apostolicum. But where the NC had to give extensive detailed formulations on the pre-existence of the Son and the Spirit,<sup>52</sup> Belhar links the triune God’s ‘pre-existence’ (*from the beginning of the world*) and ‘post-existence’ (*and will do to the end*) not so much to God self, as to *the establishment and protection of the church*. To a certain extent, the NC focuses on the immanent trinity,<sup>53</sup> whereas Belhar focuses on the economic Trinity as manifested in the history of the church.

This is immediately followed by the second movement, in the ‘heading’ of article 2, which deals in its entirety with the unity of the church: *We believe in one, holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family*. In a very delicate way, Belhar here draws on both the NC and the Apostolicum. For the unity of the church – which is the core focus of article 2 – Belhar takes over the NC-adjective of one church (which is absent from the Apostolicum). This is followed by the Apostolicum formula (the *apostolic* from the NC is therefore not included), with a non-creedal addition derived from the Heidelberg Catechism, namely, that the community of saints is *called from the entire human family*.

In the light of the heresy against which Belhar confessed, it thus derives the unity of the church in article 2 from the NC, and elaborates this unity in the four ensuing paragraphs (unity as gift and obligation; unity as visible; unity as manifested in a variety of ways; unity established in freedom). The reference to the church as a *communion of saints* enables

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52 This emphasis is evident in the description of the Son as ‘eternally begotten’ (gennhqenta pro pantwn twn aiwnwn) and as ‘begotten not made’ (gennhqenta /ou poiHQenta) and the Holy Spirit as ‘Lord’ (kurioj) who proceeds (ekporoumenai) from the Father.

53 This distinction is obviously a construction we put on NC today. Owing to the heresies it had to confront, the intra-trinitarian confession was necessary, but – as will be seen below – NC is in its Christology as historically related as any ‘economic’ theology could be.

Belhar to assert implicitly a contradiction to a view of community where differentiation is seen as ground for separation instead of *opportunities for mutual service and enrichment in the one visible people of God*. That the church is called from the entire human family enables Belhar already to assert implicitly the unity of the church against the heresy that *descent or any other human and social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the Church* (article 2, rejection 3). The theological structure of the NC (and the Apostolicum) is clearly maintained, but in line with the context and heresy of Belhar, the Trinitarian base of faith is translated into more elaborate ecclesiological terms so that the unity of the triune God becomes motivation for and is reflected in the unity of the community of saints. In this way, articles one and two of Belhar, as well as the closing section of article five, are in full consonance with the apostolic faith expressed in the Nicene Creed.

### 3.3 Christology

In the light of the Arian heresy, the NC had to give detailed attention to the divinity of the Son. This is accomplished in eight expressions from *one Lord* to *Through him all things were made*. After the Godhead of Christ is firmly established, the NC proceeds to confess the incarnated *humanity* of the Son, starting with *He came down from heaven* and ending in *He ascended into heaven* (in a series of expressions later closely followed by the Apostolicum). This twofold christological structure is present in Belhar, but interpreted in a particular way commensurate with the aim of the confession.

#### 3.3.1 *The divinity of Christ: His Lordship*

The oldest confession of Christ's divine status, already present in the New Testament (see, for example, Rom 1:3, 1 Cor 8:6 and 1 Cor 12:3), is that He is Lord. The NC is clear and simple: *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ*. The *one Lord* is in line with the NC's emphasis on the unity of God; the *one Lord* expresses the ultimate rulership and authority of Christ whose *kingdom will have no end*. Where this confession was a case of life and death in early Christianity (a challenge to the emperor), the Nicene Creed was formulated under political conditions where this would be accepted by the Roman authorities, and therefore expressed in relative freedom.

The Lordship of Christ emerges in Belhar under conditions reminiscent of early Christianity. After the confession of unity, reconciliation and justice, Article 5 expresses a challenge and a conviction:

*We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the Church, is called to confess and to do all these things, even though authorities*

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*and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.*

*Then follows: Jesus is Lord, after which the Trinitarian doxology discussed above is inserted.*

I have in a previous paper (Naude 2002b) shown that Belhar's confession of Christ's Lordship exhibits the same bi-focal vision of antecedent church witnesses. Christ is firstly Lord of the church, but also Lord of history and society. This is beautifully formulated in article five, where the Headship of the Church and Lordship over human authorities are juxtaposed in calling the church *to confess and do all these things ...* Where the church follows its only Head in obedience to his rule and is resisted by authorities and human laws, the higher commitment to the Lord will prevail.

### *3.3.2 The humanity of Christ: His incarnation*

The connection between the NC and Belhar concerning the humanity of Christ is evident from three crucial phrases that puts the whole of Christ's earthly work in a strong *pro nobis*-framework: For 'us all' (di'hmas tous anqrwpouj ) and 'for our salvation' (dia thn vmeteran swthrian) *he came down from heaven* is followed a few lines later by 'For our sake' (uper vmwn) he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. In a unique way, the NC makes it clear that Christ's work was directed at humans and their salvation and should therefore be interpreted in such a way that the reality of this salvation is honoured. Although the NC does not provide us with a specific salvation-historical theology, it would be fair to suggest that this salvation is epitomised in incarnation-as-reconciliation. Christ was crucified *for our sake* in the sense that he took upon Him our sins and was crucified in our place. And this He did *for us all*, reconciling humankind to God (Col 1:15–20), the first fruit of which is *the church* as those reconciled to God and one another because they accept Christ's work as *for our sake*.

In this way *the transition from unity to reconciliation* – so central to articles 2 and 3 in Belhar – *is made within the framework of the Nicene Creed itself*. In article 2 Belhar confesses that *Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another*. Christ's work of reconciliation is a theological summary of the incarnated Christ, and the *pro nobis*-character is reflected in the church as a community of reconciled people in the same way that the NC links the church to the work of the Trinity (obviously including the Son). Belhar therefore rests fully on the basis of the incarnate Christ as confessed in the NC, and, under threat of a serious

defilement of the gospel, expands the NC to spell out what the concrete implications of Christ's work are *for our salvation and for our sake*.

Belhar's concern is therefore with the *visibility of our salvation* and therefore substantially confesses the manifest *unity of the church* in article 2 and *reconciliation amongst people in the world* as fruit of this *beneficial work* (Belhar 3.3) in the whole of article 3. Needless to say: making salvation concrete is for Belhar an ecclesiological matter because *We believe that God has entrusted to his Church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ* (art 3, first line). In this way both the Christological and ecclesiological implications of the NC are made explicit in the context from which Belhar spoke.

### 3.3 Pneumatology: The Spirit as giver of life and prophecy

We know from text comparisons that most of the additions of the NC (381) to the original Nicea text (325) relate to the article on the Spirit (see the discussion above). For our purposes, two of those additions are of great importance: The Spirit is confessed as the *giver of life* (zwopoioj) and as the one *who has spoken through the prophets* (to lalhsan dia tw'n profhtwn). These must be read against the background of the denial of the godhead of the Spirit.

The first formulation relates to John 6:63 (the Spirit gives life), Rom 8:2 (the law of the Spirit of life) and 2 Cor 3:6 (the letter brings death, but the Spirit brings life) and emphasises the life-giving work of the Spirit, where life is understood in both physical (see the context of bread in John 6) and spiritual terms. The second formulation relates to 2 Pet 1:21 and brings a unity between the Spirit and the Word of God spoken through the prophets. The intention of the NC is clear: only God gives life, and it is God that speaks through the prophets; therefore the Spirit is equally part of the godhead and should be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son.

In Belhar, the work of the Spirit as 'life-giver' and 'Word-giver' is intimately related in a Trinitarian context and externally related to four realities: the establishment of the church (art 1); the unity in the church (art 2); reconciliation in society and the world (art 3); and ultimately justice for the destitute, the poor and the wronged (art 4).

*Article 1: We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit ...*

*The manner in which the triune God establishes and leads the church through history is via the Word-giving and life-giving Spirit.*



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*In article 2 it is confessed that through the working of God's Spirit it (the unity established by Christ's reconciliation) is a binding force; that believers are filled with one Spirit, and that the variety of spiritual gifts ... as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service.*

In article 3 we find a much more direct link to the Nicene text: after confessing that God has entrusted the message of reconciliation to the church, Belhar follows in 3.2 with a twofold repetition of the Nicene phrase referred to above:

*We believe that God by his life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity; that God by his life-giving Word and Spirit will enable His people to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world. This powerful formulation gives a distinct cosmic and social interpretation of the Word-giving and Life-giving Spirit because God (negatively) conquers social irreconciliation and (positively) opens new possibilities of life for society and the world.*

This enables Belhar to make the third and last transition from unity and reconciliation to justice in the article 4:

*We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and peace among men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that He calls his Church to follow Him in this.*

Belhar commences its fourth article with an important revelatory theological statement about the manner of God's revelation in the world. God is known to us via Jesus Christ and the Spirit. The NC has already confessed that the incarnation of Christ occurred by the power of the Spirit. What Belhar does, is to link Jesus' incarnation via the Spirit (that is, his revelation of God) not only to his birth from the virgin Mary, his crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection, but to the manner of his ministry in the world. The crucial 'markers' of Christ's humiliation and humanity – known so well from both NC and the Apostolicum – is 'filled in' with the 'markers' of his self-donating ministry in the world, as clearly attested to in the gospels:<sup>54</sup>

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54 Other than the NC, we find lists of Scriptural references throughout Belhar. I here follow the Lukan line of exploring Jesus' ministry as

*After news of the incarnation, the very same Mary, filled with the Spirit, sings a song of praise to God who will be revealed as the One who cares for the hungry and lift up the downtrodden (Luke 1:46–55). The angels bring praise to God as One who through his Son brings peace on earth (Luke 2:14). And the young Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah and claims that the Spirit is upon Him to proclaim the good news to the poor (Word-giver and life-giver!), freedom to those in prison, and restoration of sight for the blind (Luke 4:16–19). The sermon on the mount commences with the well-known beatitude: Blessed are you, the poor, for to you the kingdom of God belongs (Luke 6:19), whereas the parable of the rich man and Lazarus inverts the order of material and social status in favour of the poor (Luke 16:19–31).*

On this basis, Belhar can formulate in revelatory language: *We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace...* This is the same God who in Christ *for us all* and *for our salvation* came down from heaven (NC) to establish reconciliation, peace and justice on earth (Belhar). Belhar gives a further concrete explication of the Incarnated One, and in a situation of structural and racial injustice, and of human oppression, confesses that Christ's ministry *for us all* became a ministry focused on the destitute, the poor and the wronged, because in God there is no injustice. This is the apostolic faith of the ecumenical church today.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.5 We acknowledge<sup>56</sup> one baptism for the forgiveness of sins

If one remembers that the NC arose from the baptismal faith of the early church, the link between baptism and a belief in the forgiveness of sins (eis afhsin amartiwn) is a logical one: baptism was the sign of forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ and serves as incorporation into the body of Christ.

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suggested in Belhar article 4.

55 See confirmation of this hermeneutical perspective in *Confessing the one faith* 1991, paragraphs 120, 153–161, 277. For people who suffer, 'God's solidarity enables them to struggle against suffering and death in all its manifestations. In the particular case of human oppression, the victim is assured that God is never on the side of the oppressor, the bringer of death, but will, in his justice, protect the rights and lives of the victims' (par 157, last sentence my emphasis).

56 The use of omologoumen and prosdokwmen in the last two articles of NC is to indicate the qualitative difference with pisteuomen, which is reserved for the Trinity and (in the NC) for the church.

In Belhar this meaning of baptism and sin is assumed and retained, but interpreted in the direction of the confession's own intention: in the article on the unity of the church, the reference to one baptism from Eph 4 (article 2.4) does not so much emphasise introduction into the church as make a call to focus on the fact that those believers, now divided by human measures, *are baptised with the one baptism and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity*. Baptism is our entrance into a new communion where human divisions of culture, class, and sex are transcended, because we are all children of God (Gal 3:26–29). We are in Christ one church, and we already share one baptism; therefore, we cannot give up the precious visible unity of the people of God. In other words, Belhar, arising from a painfully divided church, is concerned about the 'entrance' into visible unity based on the already achieved 'entrance' into the church, exactly because we confess *one baptism*.

The NC focuses on the forgiveness of sins (plural form) which leaves the creed open for interpretation of both individual and communal sins (the plural subject), as well as on the ongoing forgiveness through a reappropriation of baptism. This social or structural dimension is overtly present in Belhar: article 2.3 states that *separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered*, and article 3.2 refers to the belief *that God has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity*. These social–structural descriptions of sin (separation, hatred between people, and others) are in both instances embedded in the confession that sin – in whatever form – has already been conquered by God in Christ (art 2) and the Spirit (art 3). And the Scriptures are clear: from this power we have been freed through baptism as a sign that we have been buried with Christ, but also resurrected with Him who conquered all authorities and powers (Col 2:6–15) – including the law-enforced irreconciliation amongst peoples and groups *in a land that professes to be Christian* (Belhar art 3.3).

3.6 We expect the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come

The Nicene Creed ends with an encompassing eschatological vision that includes both the personal hope of resurrection and the cosmic hope of a new creation. Against Gnostic or Manichaeian ideas of a purely 'spiritual' future, the creed – on the basis of Christ's resurrection – attests to the future of believers as an all-inclusive personal future in God's presence. And from God's purpose to set all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (Eph 1:10) springs the hope for all of creation to be transformed as God's kingdom reaches its fulfilment in a new heaven and a new earth (Isa 65:17; Rev 21). This hope, testifies the oikumene, finds expression in

the church as a communion of hope,<sup>57</sup> as ‘a sign of God’s future for the renewal of humanity’ (*Confessing the one faith* 1991, par 272).

Belhar, so deeply aware of the contingencies of history, is an equally strong eschatological confession. As already shown above, article 1 confesses God’s work in the Church since the beginning of the world *and unto its end*. The doxology in article 5 with which Belhar ends professes honour and glory *forever and ever*, opening history in the forward movement of the church, taken up in praise to God. Apart from these two eschatological concerns related to history in its relativity, Belhar – like the explication of Nicea<sup>58</sup> – also takes present history seriously. This is best expressed in a reference with a clear tone of a realised and realisable eschatology:

*We believe that the Church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwell (3.1).*

*Where the church lives reconciliation and unity within itself, and establishes such reconciliation with words and deed outside of itself as salt of the earth, the new heaven and new earth already become visible. In the language of article four: if the Church follows Jesus in serving the destitute, the poor and the wronged; and stands by people in any form of suffering and need; and as the possession of God stands where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged, the righteousness of the new earth is already realised exactly as a sign of the coming age, confessed in the Nicene creed.*

#### 4. Conclusion

There are obviously many differences between the NC and Belhar. To some of these we have referred above. But I am convinced that Belhar confesses the same apostolic faith as the one ecumenical church, universal in time and space. Reading from the 21st century, this is a vindication of the remarkable and enduring significance of a creed stemming from the fourth century after Christ. But it is equally a vindication of a confession from the late twentieth century from a place where few saw any reason for hope and expectation.

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57 See the discussion of The church: A communion of hope in section V of A common account of hope, F&O Paper 92, 1978.

58 The *Confessing the one faith* interpretation reads: ‘We are impelled by our hope to work for a more humane and just world. Our pursuit of justice and peace within history cannot bring about the kingdom, but our work is done in the trust that nothing of what we have done in expectation of the Holy City is in vain...’ (par 275, emphasis original).

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Nicea and Belhar therefore strengthen our faith as they testify to the ongoing revelation of our one God, who is to be worshipped and glorified (NC) forever and ever (Belhar).



## The Trinity in Africa

James Kombo

### 1. Introduction: The significance of African Christianity

Africa has a rather bad memory of its mission history, particularly the widely held perception that it had no God – a perception that is not only ridiculous but also formed the basic reason for African missionaries completely ignoring the African pre-Christian experience of God. At the World Missionary Conference held in 1910 in Edinburgh, Scotland, on the theme ‘Missionary Problems in Relation to the non-Christian World’, where four other world religions were represented (religions of China, Japan, Islam and Hinduism), it was roundly concluded that African religious life fits the description of what E.B. Tylor had earlier called animism.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the 1910 Edinburgh conference confirmed the thinking at the time and joined the bandwagon in disparaging African religion as having no religious content and no record of interaction with God.<sup>2</sup> This was a bad beginning in terms of attitude and facts. Its effects loom large even in our own generation.

With nostalgia, we read some of the most insightful engagements with God in the works of such early church fathers as Justin, Tertullian, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and later Augustine. These fathers were not Jews, but their profound sense of their own religious consciousness became the platform upon which they engaged with their new Christian experience. They were Greco-Romans and would use the infrastructure of that culture to express their belief in Yahweh, the God of Israel, whom they had come to know in Christ. They belonged to the Greco-Romans, but they had since converted. The God they knew and worshipped was not *theos* as he had been conceived by the Greeks, but Yahweh of Israel. These

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1 Tylor 1891.

2 Scottish LMS missionary, Robert Moffat, had earlier published the following: ‘... Satan has employed his agency with fatal success, in erasing every vestige of religious impression from the minds of the Bechuanas’ in Moffat 1842:243–244. Hastings argues that in the case of Africa, the missionary considered anything pre-Christian as harmful or valueless (Hastings 1967:60).



considerations moved the church fathers to the point where they joined Apostle Paul in his paraphrase of the *Shema*:

*For even if there are so called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'), yet for us there is but one God, the Father from whom all things come and for whom we live, and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.<sup>3</sup>*

The story of theological leadership in Africa resembles the experience of the church fathers in many ways. Those given to reimagine and reconceptualise the Christian faith for Africa often are either first- or second-generation converts. For them, the future of perceptive theology lies in retrieving the intellectual symbols in the African religious consciousness and redirecting them in the service of God made known in Christ. This task means at least four things: (1) the emergence of new and uniquely African ways of thinking about God; (2) exposing hitherto untapped resources for renewal of the church; (3) possible conflict between emerging theological process and conventional theological thinking; and (4) conflict between emerging theological process, on the one hand, and African traditional religions and Islam, on the other hand.

#### 1.1 God-talk in traditional Africa: A platform for engaging the God of Christian worship

The animism talk in African mission history was a mere caricature and a reflection of the extent to which those who interacted with Africa at that time, and therefore should have known better, chose to underestimate the African sense of God. The 1960s and 1970s saw a flood of religious literature by Africans and Africanists addressing themselves to this thinking. Some of the well-known and widely published rebuttals are seen in the works of Bolaji Idowu, John S. Mbiti and Gabriel M. Setiloane.

#### 1.2 Bolaji Idowu: One God extends beyond any territory to the whole world

Bolaji Idowu persistently affirms 'the continuity of God from the African pre-Christian past into the present Christian experience'.<sup>4</sup> In his mind, God cannot be confined in any way. 'His realm is the whole universe. All peoples are his concern. And he has revealed himself primarily to them all,

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3 1 Cor. 8:5, 6; NIV.

4 Bediako 1992:281, 284.

each race apprehending the revelation according to its native capability.’<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, he writes: ‘God is One, not many; [...] to the one God belongs the earth and all its fullness. It is this God, therefore, Who reveals Himself to every people on earth and whom they have apprehended according to the degree of their spiritual perception, ... as those who have had practical experience of him.’<sup>6</sup>

Appealing to the biblical witness, Idowu reasons as follows:

*On the basis of the Bible taken as a whole, however, there can only be one answer. There is only one God, the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them; the God who has never left Himself without witness in any nation, age or generation; Whose creative purpose has ever been at work in this world; Who by one stupendous act of climactic self-revelation in Christ Jesus came to redeem a fallen world.*<sup>7</sup>

Idowu sees God as central to African religious life. He believes that ‘in Africa, the real cohesive factor of religion is the living God and that without this one factor, all things would fall to pieces’.<sup>8</sup> He sees this one God as dominating the whole of Africa. Indeed, he argues that the African proper names for God – such as *Yamba*, that occurs in parts of Nigeria and appears in the form of *Yambe*, *Yembe* or *Ndyambi* in the Cameroons and the Congo, and as *Onyame* or *Nyame* among the Akan of Ghana and the Nilotic peoples of the greater Sudan<sup>9</sup> – seem to be a variation of one name. A similar argument had been raised earlier by E.W. Smith. Commenting on *Nyambe*, Smith had noted that the name appears

*... in its various forms: Nzambi, Nyambe, Ndyambi, Dzambi, Tsambi, Yambe, Sambu, Zam, Monzam etc. This God’s name is spread over a very large area of Western Equatorial Africa, from the Cameroons to the Northern border of Bechuanaland, and from the Atlantic Coast to the middle regions of Belgian Congo ... The name is used in at least twenty-five versions of the Holy Scripture.*<sup>10</sup>

Idowu seems to be saying two things: (1) that polytheism is not part of Africa’s vocabulary, and (2) that the African people have identical yet distinct ways of speaking about the one God. For Idowu, the variation of

5 Idowu 1965:20; cf Idowu 1962:31.

6 Ibid. 1962:31.

7 Ibid. 1965:25.

8 Ibid. 1973a:104.

9 Ibid. 1973a:103f; 1973b:26; Smith 1950:157.

10 Smith 1950:156.

the same name among different African peoples indicates that the story of God is one story told by different African communities.

1.3 John S. Mbiti: Pre-Christian African interaction with God as *preparatio evangelica*

John S. Mbiti takes the view that pre-Christian Africa's interaction with God was first and foremost *preparatio evangelica*. He demonstrates his point by employing a series of metaphors that traditional African societies use to talk about God. The metaphors he employs range from simple anthropomorphic descriptions to theriomorphic and physiomorphic descriptions of the divine.

The basic premise of Mbiti's message is that pre-Christian Africa and the early Israelites had many commonalities. For Mbiti, this could mean that traditional Africa shared the verbal context<sup>11</sup> of the metaphors used to describe God with the early Israelites. As far as Mbiti is concerned, pre-Christian Africa and the early Israelites cherished the same God, used the same metaphors to describe God, and systematized the concepts and metaphors into comparable theologies. To demonstrate his point, Mbiti isolates a large number of terms, metaphors, and similes that are used to describe God in pre-Christian Africa and uses them in a way that reminds one of the occurrences of the same symbols in the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup>

He notes, for instance, that pre-Christian Africa viewed God as the universal creator-father.<sup>13</sup> He extracts this conclusion from usage of such metaphors as excavator, hewer, carver, creator, originator, inventor,

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11 Korpel defines verbal context as 'the users' sign-context that acts as a rule narrowing down the meaning of metaphors and similes employed.' See Korpel 1990:79.

12 Okot p'Bitek accuses J.S. Mbiti of pasting together bits and pieces of the ideas of God taken from all over Africa. As far as p'Bitek is concerned, African scholars such as Mbiti, Idowu, Danquah, Busia, Kenyatta and Sengor are 'intellectual smugglers' who have draped the African gods in 'awkward Hellenic garments.' He adds that 'the African deities of the books . . . are creations of students of African religions. They are all beyond recognition to the ordinary Africans in the countryside.' See p'Bitek 1971:7, 46, 47, 50, 80, 88. My opinion is that p'Bitek's criticism of Mbiti and the other African scholars is unfair. Mbiti, like Idowu and Danquah, is simply interested in demonstrating that the African peoples had something of the self-revelation of God. Moreover, the notion of 'pasting bits and pieces taken from all over Africa' assumes a fundamental diversity of the African Negroes. This position is no longer in vogue. Modern anthropologists, ethnolinguists, and African historiographers argue for fundamental unity of the African peoples. See Kombo 2007:1-7.

13 Mbiti 1969:39.

architect, and potter that were fashioned by different African people in their description of God.<sup>14</sup> From these metaphors, Mbiti hears the African people saying that God alone is the unfathered Father; he is the one who fathered the world, owns it, and cares for it.

In respect to his essence, Mbiti notes that pre-Christian Africa perceived God as a spiritual being that does not have a material body. As such, some people simply call him 'the Great Spirit, the Fathomless Spirit, the Ever-Present Spirit or the God of Wind and Breath'.<sup>15</sup> He is the 'Great Spirit', the 'Creating Spirit and the Saving Spirit', and the 'Protecting Spirit', who made all the spirits in the universe (the Shona, the Ashanti, the Ewe, the Kagoro). He is like wind; he comes and goes (the Ga, the Bena, and the Banyarwanda). Mbiti notes that the Nuer's word for God is spirit; thus, they believe his essence is a spirit.<sup>16</sup>

God is also said to be responsible for both afflictions and salvation. Mbiti has observed that several African peoples believe God is the reason behind epidemics, calamities, destruction, death, pests, and cattle diseases (the Ambo, the Azande, the Bambuti, the Bongo, the Bavenda, and the Suk). In some cases, the personifications of God may be responsible for certain types of afflictions. The personifications of God are known to send smallpox, spiritual illnesses, bubonic plague, and even death.<sup>17</sup> Whereas God is associated with afflictions, Mbiti concludes that the African people also know him to be the deliverer and saviour. He always remembers and delivers those in trouble, the ill, the poor, and the weak.<sup>18</sup> God delivers because he is king and lord.<sup>19</sup> As the great king, he reigns over and owns all things, visible and invisible; he has absolute power, maintains order in the sky, earth and underworld, and may not be approached directly but only via intermediaries.<sup>20</sup> Since God is king and lord, he is also viewed as master. Thus, he controls the destinies of all things (the Banyarwanda, the Shongay, the Barundi), helps and teaches (the Banyarwanda, the Ganda, the Baluba, the Barotse, the Meru, the Shilluk, the Tswana, the Vugusu, the Mende, the Tiv, the Lodagaa), and, moreover, he gives rain and material things as well as life as the most precious gift.<sup>21</sup>

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14 Ibid. 1975:44.

15 Ibid. 53.

16 Ibid. 1970:23f.

17 Ibid. 80–87.

18 Ibid. 82f.

19 This is seen among the Banyarwanda, the Barundi, the Edo, the Baluba, the Twi, the Akan, the Bachwa, the Babuti, the Indem, the Ngoni, the Agikuyu, the Yoruba, the Zulu, the Bena, and the Chagga, among others (Mbiti 1970:71–73).

20 Mbiti 1970:71–73.

21 Ibid. 73–76.

God is the strong one (Yoruba, Ngombe); he is irresistible (Zulu), and he is able to alter the natural laws and completely destroy both people and objects (the Abaluhya, the Shona). He is the source of power (the Akan, the Ashanti). God commands the created world, and it obeys (the Bambuti, Banyarwanda). Even the rulers and the moral codes receive their powers from God – he is the one ‘who gives or breaks dignities’ (Banyarwanda, Zulu, the Lugbara).<sup>22</sup> In the African mind, reasons Mbiti, power is viewed ‘hierarchically in which God is at the top as the omnipotent, beneath him are the spirits and natural phenomena, and lower still are men who have comparatively little or no power at all’.<sup>23</sup>

In these accounts and countless other metaphors in Mbiti’s *Concepts of God in Africa* and in chapter 8 of my own *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought*, one already sees his basic premise that pre-Christian Africa’s ideas of God and the early Israelites had many commonalities. In Mbiti’s thinking, the commonalities, as they were perceived by pre-Christian Africa, served as *preparatio evangelica* that allowed indigenous people to recognize the missionaries’ account of God not only as what was familiar to them, but much more fundamentally as their own account of God.

#### 1.4 Gabriel M. Setiloane: The African experiences God as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*

The basic concern of Setiloane is the absence of numinousness as a foundational theological truth in Western theologies of God.<sup>24</sup> He is making his contribution in the context of what he sees as

‘... the whole discussion in the West – focused in the ‘Honest to God’ and the ‘Death of God’ theology – suggests that the West itself has lost the image of God as ‘*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*’, and deals, at the best, with a ‘*creator absconditus*’, a god of the gaps, or a saviour of individual souls destined for a pie in the sky’.<sup>25</sup>

For Setiloane, this way of understanding God is not only a threat to theology, but also to the Christian faith. Consequently, he suggests that theology must understand God not just rationally, but also as the *mysterium tremendum* and the *fascinans*.

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22 Ibid. 8–11; Mbiti 1975:50.

23 Ibid. 1969:32.

24 Setiloane 1976:78.

25 Ibid. 229.

Setiloane takes the ideas of the *mysterium tremendum* and the *fascinans* from Robert Otto. The ideas convey

‘... the daunting and the fascinating, now combine[d] in a strange harmony of contrasts, and the resultant dual character of the numinous consciousness, to which the entire religious development bears witness, at any rate from the level of ‘demonic dread’ onward, is at once the strangest and most noteworthy phenomenon in the whole history of religion. The demonic–divine object may appear to the mind as an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay, even to make it his own. The ‘mystery’ is for him not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances him; and beside that in it which bewilders and confounds, he feels a something which captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication; it is the Dionysiac–element in the numen’.<sup>26</sup>

In this excerpt, Robert Otto associates God with such elements as ‘awefulness’, ‘overpoweringness’, ‘energy’ or ‘urgency of the numinous’, ‘wrath’, ‘the wholly other’ and ‘fascination’. Setiloane wraps all these elements in the Sotho–Tswana term *selo* which, in his thinking, is equivalent to *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*.<sup>27</sup> Setiloane argues that in the symbols of the Sotho–Tswana, *selo* is described as *selo se se boitshengang, sa poitshego, se se tshabegang, se se mashwe* (‘a fearful, awful, ugly, ugly, monstrous thing’). When *selo* is applied to *Modimo* (the name for God in Sotho–Tswana), the term conveys what Otto calls *Ungeheure*, *poitshego*, which is translated as ‘monstrous’ or ‘weird’.<sup>28</sup> This allows Setiloane to describe *Modimo* as *selo* – ‘thing’ or ‘monster’.<sup>29</sup> He has personality, however. As Smith says, he is ‘in sharp distinction from everyone and everything else. ... He is a being who is not human, and never in the recollection of men was human’.<sup>30</sup> Because *Modimo* is *selo*, he is so intense that the Sotho–Tswana approached him through *badimo*. Moreover, the name *Modimo* was taboo, and the Sotho–Tswana did not

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26 Otto 1923:45.

27 Setiloane 1973:6–7.

28 Ibid. 1976:78f; 1986:33.

29 Setiloane [note 398] 6f. Cf. Setiloane 1986:22f.

30 Smith 1950:21f.

use it freely as did the missionaries.<sup>31</sup> Setiloane explains that the Sotho-Tswana felt that the missionaries did not recognize the greatness of *Modimo* enough because they used his name so freely.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. Christianisation: The God of pre-Christian Africa is the God of Christian faith

Whereas the discussions of Mbiti, Idowu and Setiloane primarily targeted the much-hyped animist label, I see their real contribution in Christianising pre-Christian Africa's sense of God. Already some amount of Christianisation had occurred when the vernacular Bibles read in African languages all over sub-Saharan Africa used the local names for God. The true significance of this kind of reconceptualization is the view that the God of the African pre-Christian tradition has turned out to be the God of Christian worship.

This kind of identification is similar to what is seen in the relationship between the Edomite *Quas* and Yahweh and the Canaanite *El* and Yahweh. Scholars of religion have not only been able to demonstrate that Yahweh displays a number of *El* characteristics, but they have also been able to observe that the Hebrew Bible contains no polemic against *El*. Also, among the Canaanites, Yahweh took over the name *El*, thus making it the gate through which Yahweh penetrated the Semitic world.<sup>33</sup> A similar situation occurs in relating the Edomites *Quas* to Yahweh. J.R. Bartlett argues as follows:

*It is quite remarkable that the Old Testament, while firmly condemning Ammonite Milcom and Moabites Chemosh as 'abominations', neither names nor condemns any Edomite God. The difference in treatment requires explanation. It may be a matter of chance, or of Israel's ignorance of Edomite belief, but perhaps the most likely explanation is that there was some awareness in Israel that Yahweh belonged to the*

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31 W.C. Willoughby explains that *Modimo* has to be approached through the *badimo* (the ancestors) because he is 'too great to be approached by the mortals.' See the details in Willoughby 1928:206ff. Setiloane notes, however, that 'despite the dangers of direct approach, IT can be called upon in mortal danger' (Setiloane [note 399] 1976:84).

32 The Sotho-Tswana still regard the use of the name *Modimo* as taboo. For example, when *Modimo* forms part of a personal name as it stands, the part having the word is avoided in everyday use of the name, 'e.g. a child whose name is 'Tiro-ya-Modimo', the work of MODIMO, would ordinarily be called simply 'Tiro'' (Setiloane [note 399] 1976:35).

33 Bosch 1973; cf. Heureux 1979.



*Edomite region and that the Edomites themselves might be among his worshippers.*<sup>34</sup>

Just as Quas and *El* were Yahwehized in the case of the Edomites and the Canaanites, so were *Modimo*, *Nyame*, *Nyasaye*, *Ngai*, *Mulungu*, and so on.

The Christianisation of *Nyasaye*, for instance, means that the Luo Christian now experiences *Nyasaye* as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this case, *Nyasaye* has become Christianised. In addition to merely being *Nyasaye* of the pre-Christian Luo, it is more significant that the referent for the Luo name, *Nyasaye*, has been reconceptualised and transformed into the God of Christian worship – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here, the most important concept in African religious heritage has clearly obtained a Christian meaning.

### 3. Africanisation: Reconceptualizing Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit in the African cultural milieu

In this paper, Africanisation is considered to be the equivalent of Hellenization of the Christian faith as it occurred in the early church. Under Hellenisation, the church utilised Greek metaphysics to describe Christian concepts to the indigenous Greek culture. Africanisation here then is the use of African intellectual culture to explain the triune God to African audiences. This therefore means that – of necessity – the Trinity must emerge from *Nzambi*, *Nyambe*, *Ndyambi*, *Dzambi*, *Tsambi*, *Yambe*, *Sambi*, *Zam*, *Monzam*, *Nyasaye*, among others, and is not borrowed from outside. In other words, *Nyasaye*, for instance, is now known to the Luo Christian as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. This reconceptualisation of God has come about as a result of the manner in which we meet God and see him revealed in the pages of the Bible. The process, however, involves re-identification and inculturation of monotheism, as well as reconceptualisation of both the Son and the Holy Spirit.

### 4. Re-identification

African Christians need to determine their own identity. In this task, African Christians need to separate themselves from the Greco-Roman influence that came with missionary Christianity, distinguish themselves from the expanding Muslim population, and critically draw from African religious consciousness without reverting to African traditional religions. African Christians are a new people, a new race, and a new *ethne*, and their numbers are explosive. By 1900, Africa had 8.7 million Christians. This

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34 Bartlett 1978.

figure rose to 60 million in the 1960s. By the year 2000, Africa had 360 million Christians, and this figure is poised to reach 633 million by the year 2025.<sup>35</sup> This numerical strength simply means that 'Africa has become, or is becoming, a Christian continent in cultural as well as numerical terms'.<sup>36</sup>

The call for re-identification finds resonance in the New Testament and in the experience of the church fathers. In the New Testament writings, the identity of Christianity as a 'race, a nation, a people' is evident.<sup>37</sup> In his reference to the Christians, Peter preferred to use 'a race, a nation, a people'. In contrast, Paul speaks about 'the Jews, the Greeks, and the community of faith'.<sup>38</sup>

By the time of the church fathers, this triple division on the basis of religion and worship had become accepted as a basis for developing a distinct Christian consciousness in the Greco-Roman context.<sup>39</sup>

Fundamental to re-identification is conversion – turning the African world to Christ. In his comment on conversion, Andrew Walls says:

*To become a convert ... is to turn, and turning involves not a change of substance but a change of direction. Conversion, in other words, means to turn what is already there in a new direction. It is not a matter of substituting something new for something old – that is proselytizing, a method which the early church could have adopted but deliberately chose to jettison. Nor is conversion a matter of adding something new to something old, as a supplement or in a synthesis. Rather, Christian conversion involves redirecting what is already there, turning it in the direction of Christ. That is what the earliest Jerusalem believers had already done with their Jewish inheritance. Turning that inheritance toward Messiah Jesus transformed the inheritance but did not destroy its coherence or its continuity. On the contrary, it produced a model of thought and life that was Christian because Jesus was at its center; yet it remained essentially and inalienably Jewish.<sup>40</sup>*

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35 Sanneh 2003:14.

36 Ibid. 36.

37 See 1 Pet. 2:9.

38 See 1 Cor. 10:32; and cf. John 4:21ff.

39 Bediako 1992:36.

40 Walls 1997:148.

## 5. Worship of one God: Monotheism

Pre-Christian Africa had a form of monotheism that has been called 'primitive monotheism' or 'diffused monotheism',<sup>41</sup> ably defined by Bolaji Idowu as a type of monotheism, where 'the good Deity delegates certain portions of his authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him'.<sup>42</sup> The Yoruba, for instance, recognize the supremacy of *Oludumare*, but they also have innumerable divinities. No one really knows the actual number of the Yoruba divinities; they simply call them *orisa*, meaning 'legion'.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, research has not been able to offer a reasonable account of the divinities among the people of West Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa, and parts of East Africa. The divinities among these people are simply too numerous and complex.

Note, however, that pre-Christian African religious consciousness had no place for polytheism – the worship of many gods. D.C. Scott writes about God as he is perceived among the Nyanja people and says, for instance, that 'you cannot put the plural with God because God is one. There are no idols called gods, and spirits are spirits of the people who have died, not gods. Hence God is one, is a distinct person, cannot be identified with the powers of nature, nor confounded with spirits in general'.<sup>44</sup> Kwame Bediako comes to a similar conclusion when he writes that 'virtually all African indigenous languages make a distinction between Supreme God and the divinities, ancestors and natural forces that are not God. Worshipers know who is God, and who is not'.<sup>45</sup> In all this discussion, there is ample clarity about 'primitive monotheism' and its attendant intermediaries, on the one hand, and polytheism, on the other hand.

Conversion now requires the African worshiper to turn around 'primitive monotheism' in the direction of Christ. Situating Christ and the Holy Spirit in the center of primitive monotheism has the effect of expunging the agency of the intermediaries, powers of nature, or spirits from the service of deity. This is then the fundamental difference between

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41 The concept of 'primitive monotheism' or 'diffused monotheism' may be traced to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the early discussants of this concept include Henry Callaway, Andrew Lang, and Edwin W. Smith. See the books: Henry Callaway, *The Religious Systems of the Amazulu* (1870), Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion* (1909), and Edwin W. Smith, *African Ideas of God* (1950). The other serious discussants of this concept are E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (1956) and G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (1961).

42 Idowu 1962:62, cited in Kombo 2007:169, 170; see also Schmidt 2017:262–282.

43 Gehman 1989:125.

44 Scott 1929:348.

45 Bediako 2007:11.

primitive monotheism and Christian monotheism. The other difference, of course, is in the way the divine category is conceived. Whereas in primitive monotheism, God is a monad – although he employs the services of intermediaries – in Christian monotheism the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – yet, they are not three lords, but one lord without intermediaries.

The readers of vernacular Bibles are convinced that the monotheism that speaks to African spirituality arises out of their experience of God displayed in the pages of the Bible. The Luo Bible translators, for instance, used *Nyasaye* as referring to God, and wherever the term ‘Father’ appears in the text of the Bible, the Luo translators of the Bible rendered it *Nyasaye Wuoro* (God the Father). Thus, the Luo Christians see God (*Nyasaye*) and the Father (*Wuoro*) as mutually interchangeable. In everyday worship, God the Father (*Nyasaye Wuoro*), God the Son (*Nyasaye Wuowi*), and God the Holy Spirit (*Nyasaye Roho Maler*) are confessed. These vernacular readers of the Luo Bible and converts to Christianity understand the confession of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be worship of one God (monotheism), not in the ‘common substance-essence’ terms of the Greco-Roman heritage, nor in the ‘monotheism as one-ness, nondivisible essence’ in Islam<sup>46</sup> and Neo-Platonism, nor as monotheistic oneness in the sense of an ‘absolute subject’ in the Idealism philosophy. Here, the oneness of God is confessed in the context of the fatherhood, as contemplated from the point of view of the Great *Muntu*, whose *NTU* is split between the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this case, the Father is the Great *Muntu* (God) who uniquely shares the Divine *NTU* with the Son and the Holy Spirit. For the Luo Christian, for instance, this must of necessity mean that the Son and the Holy Spirit are now constitutive in the identity of *Nyasaye* or monotheism. In other words, the Luo Christian can no longer conceive of the eternal identity of *Nyasaye* (monotheism) without splitting the same between the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>47</sup>

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46 Skarsaune 1957:348. Cf. Wolfson 1956.

47 See Kombo 2007:245–247, for a detailed discourse on the application of the *NTU* metaphysics to the Trinity. The primary meaning of ‘person’ in the African context is ‘the genuine *Muntu*.’ The ‘genuine *muntu*’ in human persons is only a ‘tributary’ of the ‘Great *Muntu*’ or simply a reflection of the ‘Great *Muntu*.’ But to say that the Son is a person is not the same as saying that he is a person in the sense that you and I are persons. The ‘genuine *Muntu*’ that you and I have, are but tributaries of the ‘Great *Muntu*.’ The ‘genuine *Muntu*’ that the Son has, is the ‘Great *Muntu*’ himself. Thus, the Son is a perfect reflection of the ‘Great *Muntu*,’ the Holy Spirit is a perfect reflection of the ‘Great *Muntu*,’ and the Father is a perfect reflection of the ‘Great *Muntu*.’ Thus the Son is a person in the ultimate sense, the Holy Spirit is a person in the ultimate

Would this amount to polytheism? Not at all, because the Christian faith has always seen itself as monotheistic in the same way in which the Rabbinic thought of the second century did.<sup>48</sup> Justin Martyr raised the matter of the existence of *ἡτερος θεος* with Trypho.<sup>49</sup> In the argumentation of Justin Martyr, 'Christ, not the Father, was the one who appeared in the theophanies of the Old Testament ... he is to be identified with God's Wisdom, who is spoken of in the Bible as a second divine person, begotten by God, but not separated from him'.<sup>50</sup> In response to this thesis, Trypho the Jew does not say that that particular position destroys the Christian claim to monotheism. In fact, Trypho already believes that the Christians reject idolatry and, at the same time, admits that the scripture may know a *ἡτερος θεος*.<sup>51</sup> The implication of this submission in the pre-Nicene sources is that the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit does not reject the Jewish understanding of monotheism. In fact, there is a general lack of awareness that the admission of the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit may create theological problems to the Jewish concept of monotheism.<sup>52</sup>

Islamic religion and African traditional religions may reject Christian monotheism. Their reasons for rejecting the Christian stand are not theological. Scholars of African religions who reject Christian monotheism do so on cosmological grounds. J.N.K. Mugambi, for instance, believes that the 'persons' in the Trinity should be done away with because, in the African mind, 'they are misleading, vague and confusing'.<sup>53</sup> Studies on Islamic polemics of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, indicate that the Muslims' rejection of Christian monotheism was based on their understanding of the Neoplatonic of essence and attributes,<sup>54</sup> where plurality presupposes

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sense, and the Father is a person in the ultimate sense. Just as each of us reveal the nature of the 'genuine Muntu,' the little 'tributary' of God in each of us, so the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit fully reveal the 'Great Muntu'. No one can fully reveal the 'Great Muntu' except an ultimate person, and we know of three ultimate persons from Christian theology: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Persons cannot exist in isolation. These ultimate persons have always existed and will always exist in a community. See also Tempels 1959:28; Setiloane 1986:13; and Idowu 1965:19.

48 See Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, ch. 10 –19 and 55–63 (2003).

49 Martyr 2003:55.1.

50 Skarsaune 1957:56–62, 126–129.

51 Ibid. 362.

52 Ibid. 355.

53 Mugambi 1989:75, 77

54 Skarsaune [note 421] 347.

the materiality of the underlying substance.<sup>55</sup> Since God is not material, he cannot be said to be plural.

## 6. The Incarnation

The Bible shows the Son in a manner that requires belief that God became incarnate, suffered on the cross, and redeemed mankind by dying and rising again.<sup>56</sup> In other words, God endured to be born, to become man, and to suffer. Thus, as Fulton has clearly observed, 'nowhere is the union of God and man so concrete and definite, and so universal in its import, as in the Christian religion'.<sup>57</sup> Some of the biblical passages which lend themselves to this interpretation are (1) passages of identity which posit simple identity of Christ with God, (2) passages of distinction which distinguish one 'lord' from another 'lord', and (3) passages of derivation which suggest that the Son is from the Father.<sup>58</sup>

Why is incarnation important to Africa? In answering this question, I refer to John S. Mbiti's long held view that the African is incurably religious. For him

*... [it] is highly doubtful that even at their very best, those other religious systems and ideologies current in Africa are saying anything radically new to, and different from, what is already embedded in Christianity. And yet the strength and uniqueness of Christianity do not lie in the fact that its teaching, practice and history have all the major elements of the other religious traditions. The uniqueness of Christianity is in Jesus Christ ... [It] is He, therefore, and only He, who deserves to be the goal and standard for individuals and mankind ... I consider traditional religions, Islam and other religious systems to be preparatory and even essential ground in the search for the Ultimate. But only Christianity has the terrible responsibility of pointing the way to that Ultimate Identity, Foundation and Source of security.<sup>59</sup>*

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55 Aristotle 1912–1952. See particularly XII.8.1074A.

56 In Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho, Judaism is portrayed as having no problems with the issue of a 'second God' (see Dialogue 16; 57.1; 58.2; 60.3; 63.1), however, Judaism recoils at the idea that this other God actually became man. In Dialogue 68.1, Trypho says: 'You are enduring to prove an incredible and almost impossible thing, that God endured to be born and to become man!'

57 Fulton 1921:458.

58 Pelikan 1971:175.

59 Mbiti 1969:277.

The uniqueness of Christ must mean, therefore, that he is not just a friend, liberator, elder brother, ancestor, brother, king/chief, healer, master of initiation, and so on. More importantly, he is God himself. In other words, the genuine *Muntu* of the Son is the Great *Muntu* himself. The Son is therefore a perfect reflection of the Great *Muntu* – God himself.<sup>60</sup>

The African thinking says that salvation and deliverance belong to God. He always remembers and delivers those in trouble, the ill, the poor, and the weak.<sup>61</sup> He performs these functions because he is king and lord.<sup>62</sup> As the great king, he reigns over and owns all things, visible and invisible; he has absolute power and maintains order in the sky, the earth, and the underworld.<sup>63</sup> He controls and commands all things, helps, and teaches, and moreover, he gives rain and material things, as well as life – the most precious gift.<sup>64</sup> Even the rulers and the moral codes receive their powers from God.<sup>65</sup>

The Bible seems to say that salvation and deliverance belong to Christ. To the African Christian mind, this must mean that Christ is God contemplated from king, lord, and saviour. Christ is therefore not a ‘mode of God’, as indicated by Idealism, nor is he a mere attribute of God, as Judaism and Islam would accept. Similarly, Christ is not *Nommo* – ‘the son of God’ – in the sense of the Dogon, and neither is he one of the two sons of God as the Ganda believe, nor merely a god in the sense of being one of the sons of God who is conceived to be the father of gods.<sup>66</sup> Christ is God because he shares in the *NTU* of God and as such he is king, lord, and savior. Salvation and deliverance in Christ are all-encompassing and extend to the entire African world – they apply to all the elements in the African world: the spirits, man, animals and plants, and even phenomena and objects without biological life (such as rocks, time, beauty, authority, and so on). The Son therefore saves mankind and presents him/her as holy and blameless before God, but his salvation has direct consequences to the entire ranges of *umuntu* (all the life forces with intelligence), *ikintu* (things, objects, animals, plants and minerals), *ahantu* (place and time),

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60 Kombo 2007:245.

61 Mbiti 1970:82f.

62 This is seen among the Banyarwanda, the Barundi, the Edo, the Baluba, the Twi, the Akan, the Bachwa, the Babuti, the Indem, the Ngoni, the Agikuyu, the Yoruba, the Zulu, the Bena, and the Chagga, among others (Mbiti 1970:71–73).

63 Mbiti [note 432] 71–73.

64 Ibid. 73–76.

65 Ibid. 8–11; Mbiti 1975:50.

66 Ibid. 114–116.



and *ukuntu* (modalities in which power acts, such as quality, quantity, relation, action, passion, position and possession).<sup>67</sup>

## 7. The pneumatological question

Pre-Christian Africa perceived God as a spiritual being and not having a material body. God is 'the Great Spirit, the Fathomless Spirit, the Ever-Present Spirit or the God of Wind and Breath.'<sup>68</sup> He is the 'Great Spirit,' the 'Creating Spirit and the Saving Spirit' and the 'Protecting Spirit'.<sup>69</sup> These terms simply denote that God is a spiritual being. But the African conceptual framework also has spirits as a special category. Spirits are part of *umuntu*, but they have a higher *NTU* than some forms of existence within *umuntu* (for example, man) and, therefore, they can influence them. The spirits can also influence *ikintu*, *ahantu*, and *ukuntu*. On this account, the Holy Spirit presented the first translators of the Bible into the African languages with a special difficulty because they needed to separate the Holy Spirit from God, on the one hand, and from the spirits, on the other hand.

There are African words for 'holy' and 'spirit' but, as Mbiti explains, 'the combination which gives us the "Holy Spirit" as part of the Trinity is specifically Christian heritage'.<sup>70</sup> In the context of the Bantus of East Africa, for instance, the Kiswahili word, *Roho*, was adopted to represent the concept of the Holy Spirit instead of the vernacular words for spirit.<sup>71</sup> The Protestant Acholi of Uganda adopted *Cwiny Maleng* (heart), while their Catholic counterparts adopted *Tipu Maleng* (shadow, depiction, and ancestral spirit), and *Maleng*, that specifically refers to either physical or ethical purity.<sup>72</sup> Although (from these two examples) the new concepts of *Roho* and *Cwiny Maleng* or *Tipu Maleng* refer to the third person of the Trinity, the exact reference of the theological terms *Roho*, *Cwiny Maleng*, or *Tipu Maleng* has remained elusive to many African Christians as a result of the traditional interferences imposed by cosmological structures.

There is so much mention of the Holy Spirit in African Christianity, but there is very little by way of reflective theology on the same. Theology that will adequately distinguish the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, it seems to me, will seek to proceed as follows: (1) distinguish the spirits in African cosmology from the Holy Spirit; (2) relate the Holy Spirit

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67 For an in-depth analysis of the NTU philosophy, see Kombo 2007:151-153.

68 Mbiti [note 436] 53.

69 Mbiti [note 432] 23f.

70 Mbiti 1994:103.

71 Mugambi 1989:65

72 Behrend 1999:116.

to Christ;<sup>73</sup> and (3) relate the Holy Spirit to the Father. The spirits in African cosmology are part of *umuntu*, and they can control *ikintu*, *ahantu* and *ukuntu*. The Bible depicts the Holy Spirit who operates in the church (gives gifts, sanctifies, empowers, and so on) and in the world's history as the same Spirit who exeges the Father. He is the very same Spirit of Yahweh who was known in Israel. The Holy Spirit is God – the Great *Muntu* himself. As such, he sustains the spirits and all elements of *umuntu*, *ikintu*, *ahantu* and *ukuntu* because he is the Great *Muntu* himself. The pneumatological problem in Africa will be how to separate the spirits in African existence, on the one hand, and how to differentiate from each other the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, on the other hand.

#### 8. Concluding remarks: Christianity is an African religion

God has revealed himself as one, yet we in the Christian faith have experienced him as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. This view, explains Karl Rahner,

*[confirms first] ... that knowledge of the unique, transcendent, personal God which is always stirring into life whether naturally or supernaturally. ... Second, the Christian conception will always express God's passionate protest against every kind of polytheistic or pantheistic deification of the world. ... Third, it alone will be able to say unambiguously and definitively just how the personal, transcendent desires in actual fact stand to the world in his sovereign freedom, namely, as the God who actually discloses his inmost self to man out of grace.*<sup>74</sup>

Africa exists in what Ali Mazrui has called the triple heritage: African traditional religions, Islam, and European influence. Note that Ali Mazrui writes in the mid-1980s and speaks about two major religions of Africa, but he omits Christianity – apparently because he prefers to place it into the rubric of European influence.<sup>75</sup> When Okot p'Bitek wrote in the 1970s as an apologist for the African consciousness, he also did not have kind words for African Christianity.<sup>76</sup> Today, there are no scholars of renown on this side of the debate. Kwame Bediako, Lamin Sanneh and Philip Jenkins<sup>77</sup> have indicated from research that, in our own time, Christianity

73 Pelikan [note 429] 213.

74 Rahner 1965:85, 86.

75 Mazrui 1986.

76 p'Bitek 1971.

77 The following are some of the most incisive publications on Christianity as an African religion: K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa. The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (1995); L. Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*

has become an African religion. This paper is an attempt to bring this new African religion to testify most effectively, truthfully, and reverently of the inexplicable Great Muntu who has revealed himself to us in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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*The Gospel Beyond the West* (2003); and P. Jenkins, *The Next Christianity* (2002).

# The Trinity in Africa

Teddy C. Sakupapa

## 1. Introduction

This contribution is a literature-based research that involved analysis of primary literature on the Trinity in African theology. Although the beginning of the historical development of the Christian doctrine of God as the Trinity may be rooted in Africa, not least because of the theological contributions of early African theologians such as Tertullian, Origen, Arius, Athanasius and St. Augustine (Bediako 2004:154; Ngong 2017:55; Ogbonnaya 1994:56), this article focuses on Trinitarian hermeneutics in modern African Christian theology (hereafter African theology). It is a narrative analysis of the African discourse on the Trinity with reference to three phases in the history of African theology. These are namely the phase of initial debates on the Christian theological validity of African concepts of God, the phase of literary productivity on African Christologies and, finally, the phase of post-colonial African theology. In the context of this contribution, the phrase 'African theology' refers to modern academic 'theological reflection by African Christians on the interplay between Christian tradition and the African religio-cultural heritage, including contemporary experience' (Sakupapa 2018:407).

Given debates on the racialisation of the concept of Africa, the terms 'Africa' and 'African' denote respectively the geographical region known as sub-Saharan Africa and peoples indigenous to this region. Such a deployment of the terms Africa and African is significant not only for analytical purposes but also given contemporary decolonial debates on the 'geo-politics and body politics of knowledge' (Mignolo 2007:453).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, to foreground the locus of my enunciation, the African in this research is the black African. However, given the colonial legacy of the language divide between and among Anglophone, Francophone

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1 For philosophical discussion on conceptualisation of Africa and African, see Mudimbe (1988).

and Lusophone Africa, the analysis was limited to data sources in the English language.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The ecumenical significance of the 20th century renaissance of Trinitarian theology

It is necessary to offer brief comments on the 20th century Trinitarian renaissance, not least because of the significance of two issues that have emerged as central concerns in contemporary Trinitarian theology,<sup>3</sup> namely the relationship between the economic and the immanent Trinity, and the practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity (Venter 2010:573). Schwöbel (1995:1–30) identifies groups of factors that led to renewed interest in Trinitarian theology in this regard. The first of these is the ‘encounter of Western theology with the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy in ecumenical conversations’. Karl Rahner’s (1904–1984) diagnosis of marginalisation of the Trinity in western theology constitutes the second group of factors. The other factors identified by Schwöbel (1995) include the relationship between philosophical theism (and philosophical atheism) and a Trinitarian doctrine of God, and the relationships between the Trinitarian understanding of God and the understanding of human persons and human society.

Following the formative contributions of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) and the German Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984) to the renaissance of Trinitarian theology, many theologians have articulated various Trinitarian theologies. Amongst other concerns, theologians have engaged with the significance and implications of Rahner’s (1970:21–22) Grundaxiom, namely that ‘the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity’. These include Jurgen Moltmann, Walter Kasper, T.F. Torrance, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Colin Gunton, among others.<sup>4</sup> Rahner’s (1970) axiom continues to trigger reflections on the relationship between the economic and the immanent Trinity. Some scholars are wary that Rahner (1970) eclipses the immanent Trinity, or that he identifies the immanent and the economic Trinity too closely. Still others fear that the distinctions between the economic and immanent Trinity should not be drawn too sharply. According to LaCugna (1991:312, 342–347), one of Rahner’s key interpreters, if there is any distinction between the ‘economic

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2 For instance, the following have been published in French but not included in the overview: Ukwuije (2018); Bishwende (2008).

3 For an overview, see Chalamet and Vial (2014).

4 Other important figures to broader Trinitarian theology include Wolfhart Pannenberg, Eberhard Jungel, Colin Gunton, Elizabeth Johnson, Robert Jensen, Ted Peters and Leonardo Boff, among others.

trinity' and the 'immanent trinity', is that it is conceptual, rather than ontological. LaCugna thus suggests an alternative paradigm to Rahner, namely that *oikonomia* and *theologia* are inseparable.<sup>5</sup> In LaCugna's (1991:211, 348–349) view, the 'close relationship between soteriology and doxology confirms the proper connection between *oikonomia* and *theologia*, essence and energies, which are inseparable in theology'. For Zizioulas (1991a:23–24), what is needed is an apophatic theology in order not to draw sharp distinctions between ontology and epistemology. However, in Moltmann's (1981:161) doxological understanding of Rahner's axiom (1970), he argues that the specific starting point for distinguishing between the economic and immanent Trinity is to be found in doxology.<sup>6</sup>

The other issue raised in the recent Trinitarian Renaissance concerns the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. Rahner (1970:10) succinctly placed this issue on the theological agenda by highlighting the isolation of the Trinity from Christian faith and life. Among others, LaCugna (1991:1) attempted to illustrate that the doctrine of the Trinity is 'ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life'. Similarly, Moltmann (1981:165) accentuates the practicality of the doctrine of Trinity with reference to its significance to overcome domination, whether ecclesiological, sexual or political, thus articulating a social doctrine of the Trinity. Others have explored the implications of Trinitarian theology for anthropology, the doctrine of creation, ecclesiology, ecumenism, ecology (David Williams), a critique of sexism (David Cunningham, Elizabeth Johnson), mission, pastoral theology (Paul Fiddes), leadership, personhood (Zizioulas) and political theology (Miroslav Volf). Counterintuitively, these contributions affirm Jenson's (1997:31) observation that the Trinity is not a 'separate puzzle to be solved but the framework within which all theology's puzzles are to be solved'.

### 3. The Trinity in African Christian theology

Notwithstanding the significance of the 20th century rediscovery of Trinitarian theology as described above, it was and remains a typically western and North American affair. In the growing body of literature on African Trinitarian hermeneutics, African theologians are demonstrating creativity in their various reflections on the Trinity. Given that the African discourse on the Trinity cuts across denominational and theological traditions, it may be described rightly as an ecumenical discourse. In what

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5 Some have charged LaCugna (1991) with reducing the Trinity to the economic plane.

6 For a discussion on the various models of understanding this relationship, see Lee (2009).

follows, I offer an overview of contemporary African reflections on the Trinity with specific reference to three phases in the history of modern African Christian theology.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.1 Phase 1: The quest for the theological validity of African concepts of God

While much of the early 19th century missionary and anthropological discourse denied Africans any concept(s) of God or, for that matter, religion, pioneer African Christian theologians such as John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu located the African belief in a Supreme Being as a point of continuity between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity. The polemic nature of this early phase of African theological discourse on God was prompted by the western missionary denigration of African religion (and culture) and denial of the existence of African concepts of God. They sought to remedy western missionary translations of God which portrayed God as foreign to Africans. I argue that this discourse by pioneer African theologians may well serve as a prolegomenon to any meaningful Christian theology of God in modern African theology (cf. Uzukwu 2009: 32). It must be noted that these theologians, most notably Mbiti and Idowu, engaged with texts by western scholars such as Edwin Smith, Malcolm McVeigh and Geoffrey Parrinder,<sup>8</sup> which offered sympathetic accounts of concepts of God.<sup>9</sup> Smith, particularly, intimated on the African belief in the Supreme Being as a point of continuity between ATR and Christianity (hereinafter continuity thesis).

This continuity thesis found expression in many of Mbiti's writings. In his *Concepts of God in Africa*, Mbiti (2013:91) argued that the notion of God as creator was 'the commonest attribute of the works or activities of God' among African peoples whose concepts and names of God were compiled by him. Idowu shared Mbiti's claim for the theological significance of African names for God and of a monotheistic continuity between Christianity and ATR. However, Mbiti's claim of the implausibility of atheism in traditional

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7 For an overview of the South African contribution, see Venter (2016).

8 It was Parrinder who first introduced African Traditional Religion as a separate category of study while teaching at the University College Ibadan in Nigeria.

9 See, for instance, the edited volume by Smith, namely *African Ideas of God: A Symposium* (1950) that brings together surveys on beliefs about God amongst particular peoples in sub-Saharan Africa. The authors claim that the 'tribes' they studied had belief in the Supreme Being. Of the 12 contributors, 11 were western missionaries. See also Smith's *The Secret of the African* (1929) and *African Beliefs and the Christian Faith* (1936); McVeigh's *God in Africa: Concepts of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (1974) and Parrinder's *African Traditional Religion* (1954).



Africa, encapsulated in his famous phrase, namely that 'Africans are notoriously religious', has been interrogated. A notable critic in this regard is Eloi Messi-Metogo (1997:33–45) who, contra-Mbiti, documents accounts of African indifference to the Supreme Being.

Although affirmed by several African theologians who nevertheless expressed differing views on the degree of continuity (cf. Dickson 1979; Kibicho 1978; Setiloane 1979),<sup>10</sup> the continuity thesis attracted two related but different critiques. The first came from African evangelicals (for example, Byang Kato) who stressed discontinuity in God's identity on the basis of alleged doctrinal orthodoxy. The second emerged from the ranks of African intellectuals (for example, Okot p'Bitek), who critiqued African Christian theological reinterpretation of African concepts of God for the sake of decolonisation (see Conradie & Sakupapa 2018:43–47).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, a salient implication of the continuity thesis was that Africans had known God long before the arrival of missionaries. Little wonder that the late Gambian scholar Lamin Sanneh attributed the successful implantation of Christianity in Africa to the facilitating role of ATR, most notably in respect of the missionary appropriation of African names of God in vernacular translations of the Bible. In his view, Christian expansion in Africa was 'virtually limited to those societies whose people had preserved the indigenous name for God' (Sanneh 2003:18). In his defence of Mbiti's continuity thesis,<sup>12</sup> Bediako (2000) affirmed Sanneh's logic (2003) of translatability.<sup>13</sup> According to Bediako (2000:16), 'the God whose name had been hallowed in [African] indigenous languages in the pre-Christian tradition was found to be the God of the Bible, in a way that neither Zeus, nor Jupiter, nor Odin could be' (cf. Walls 2002:121). By thus arguing, Bediako (2000) affirmed Mbiti's explanation of the relationship

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10 For instance, Samuel Kibicho of Kenya and the South African theologian Gabriel Setiloane posited radical continuity. The former argued that ATR possessed a saving knowledge of God, while the latter provided a rather unclear view in which he portrayed the Supreme Being of ATR as superior to the western Christian notion of God.

11 p'Bitek (2011:42) labelled these African theologians as intellectual smugglers, claiming that they Christianised and Hellenised the African deity. See also Donatus Nwoga's argument in his *The Supreme Being as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought* (1984) that the Supreme Being is a loan God introduced amongst the Igbo by Europeans.

12 See his *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (1992). This text is one of the most elaborate treatments of the theological significance of African pre-Christian religions.

13 If Sanneh speaks of translatability as a 'fundamental character of Christianity', Walls (2002:29) opined that the divine word is 'culturally infinitely translatable'.

between ATR and Christian that ATR served a preparatory role (*praeparatio evangelica*) for the Gospel. For Mbiti (1979:68), what the Gospel brought to Africa was Jesus Christ. Hence, Mbiti (1971:190) spoke of Jesus Christ as the 'final test for the validity and usefulness of any theological contribution' and that theology 'falls or stands on how it understands, translates and interprets Jesus Christ at a given time, place and human situation'. These early reflections laid the ground for the significance which Christology had in the subsequent history of African theology (see Mugambi & Magesa 1998). Nyamiti's (1989:17) remark that Christology is 'the most developed subject in today's African theology' illumines this observation.

### 3.2 Phase 2: Trinitarian implications of Christology

Following the creative reconstruction of the idea of God in ATR as discussed above, African theologians were faced with the task of clarifying who Jesus Christ was to the African. This was in part necessitated by a pastoral concern, namely, how to make the African Christian at home in the new faith. Given the extant literature on African Christology,<sup>14</sup> I limit my analysis to the Trinitarian implications of the main trajectories of African Christological thinking. African Christologies have tended to develop along the lines of the variants of African theologies, namely inculturation, liberation and reconstruction.<sup>15</sup> Inculturation theologians ascribed various honorific titles to Jesus, including ancestor,<sup>16</sup> elder brother (*Kabesélé*), great chief (*Pobee*), guest (*udoh*), healer (*Appiah-Kubi*; *Kolié*), master of initiation (*Sanon*), Servant-King (*Ukachukwu Manus*) and revealer (*Ezigbo*). In African Christologies of liberation, the image of Christ as the liberator was foregrounded. This found expression within the three strands of African liberation theology, namely, liberation theology in Africa, south of the Limpopo river (see Ela 1986:87; Magesa

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14 For useful overviews of African Christology, see Nyamiti's and other essays in *Jesus in African Christianity* (1989). See also Stinton's *Jesus of Africa* (2004) for recent perspectives.

15 Nyamiti (1989) identified two main approaches to African Christology, namely inculturation and liberation. Others, such as Stinton (2004), have categorised the various contemporary African Christologies under four models, namely Jesus as 'life-giver', 'mediator', 'loved one' and 'leader'.

16 Exponents of ancestral Christology include Benézét Bujo (Proto-Ancestor; Ancestor par Excellence), Charles Nyamiti (Brother-Ancestor), Kwame Bediako (Supreme Ancestor) and John Pobee (Jesus is *Nana*), amongst others. The concern of these theologians is captured in Pobee's (1979:81) question, namely 'Why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe or nation?'

1989:151–163), African women's theology (Oduyoye 2002:98)<sup>17</sup> and South African black theology (see Mofokeng 1987:42).<sup>18</sup> Most recently, another approach to Christology has emerged, namely reconstructive Christology (see Mugambi 1995:90). Although Mugambi (1995:13) has not elaborated on reconstructive Christology, he intimates that the mission of Jesus of Nazareth was reconstructive. A more developed reconstructive Christology is articulated by the Congolese Lutheran theologian, Kä Mana (2004), who creatively integrates the motifs of identity and liberation. Kä Mana's Christology of abundant life foregrounds Christology as the heart of the reconstruction of African societies. Christ is the catalyst of reconstruction.

There are nevertheless many limitations to African Christologies, particularly those that employ what Nyamiti (1994:70) calls 'the comparative analogical method'. The first challenge relates to the necessary starting point of most African Christologies, namely, from below. African Christologies have tended to pay less attention to the divine ontology of Christ, and thus overlook the relationship between his divinity and humanity. This challenge is most pronounced in Christologies which employ the analogy of ancestor to illumine the mediatory role of Christ between God and humanity. These Christologies fail to capture the divinity of Christ, given the problematic associated with the theological interpretation of the identity of ancestors (see Stinton 2004:138, 156). An exceptional but not fully developed ancestral Christology that seeks to preserve the divinity of Christ is Bediako's (2000:25) ancestral incarnational Christology, which attempts to do so by emphasising the incarnation. The need for adequate African accounts of Jesus Christ as 'fully divine' has been variously intimated (see Nyamiti 1994:71; Pobee

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17 Oduyoye speaks of Christ as the Agyenkwa, which means the one who rescues.

18 Given the South African black experience of oppression in the context of racist oppression and exploitation, Mofokeng's (1983:x) *Christology* is an exploration of how 'faith in Jesus Christ empower black people who are involved in the struggle for liberation'. Mofokeng reversed the Christological question from 'who do you say that I am?' to 'who do you say that I am and how can I be liberated to my authentic self?' Black Christology, according to Mofokeng (1983:243ff ), starts in the dark lit stable and the manger in Bethlehem. Black theology's liberative praxis thus illumines the history of Jesus. Mofokeng's (1983) black Christology (necessarily from below) elaborates a theological anthropology that illumines the insurrection of the oppressed black humanity (the cross-bearers). Given the stress on black subjectivity, black Christology is black consciousness. Accordingly, Mofokeng (1983:259) depicts the resurrection of Christ as God's insurrection that inspires the oppressed people's insurrection against injustice. Mofokeng's (1983) *Christology* links the incarnation and resurrection as well as creation and salvation.

1979:85–98). Another limitation of ancestral Christologies relates to the changing sociocultural contexts in Africa in the face of modernisation and urbanisation. This concern illustrates the fate of some Christologies articulated by professional theologians, which are limited in their practical and pastoral significance for churches and Christian discipleship and mission. This concern has found expression in some recent contributions which call for methodological reorientation that takes a seriously grassroots perspective (see Stinton 2004:270–278).<sup>19</sup> Further, given the charismatisation or pentecostalisation of mainline Christianity in Africa, African theologians also need to account for the Christologies of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa.<sup>20</sup>

Liberation Christologies may also be charged with reductionism for apparently absolutising a particular dimension of oppression. For Nyamiti (1996:73), what is needed is integral liberation.

Notwithstanding the enduring issues in African Christology, African theologians have generally affirmed the creedal belief regarding the divinity and humanity of Christ. Nevertheless, several African Christological images and symbols are limited in giving expression to divine identity of Christ. If so, this begs further elaboration of how the Master of Initiation, the Ancestor par excellence, is the same as the God confessed as Truine.

### 3.3 Phase 3: A biblical understanding of who Christ is in himself ‘plunges us into the theology of the Trinity’ (Nyamiti)

From the foregoing analyses of the African discourses on the continuity of God and on Christology, it is evident that the focus on the continuity of God has not led to thoroughgoing Trinitarian reflections. As the Kenyan theologian Kombo (2007:15) contends, African Christians must view God not just within the confines of African concepts of God, but must also explore how ‘the incarnation and Pentecost radically modify their prior’ concepts of God (cf. Vahakangas 2002:70). In what follows, I discuss African Trinitarian hermeneutics with reference to three broad approaches, which are identified in the following manner. In the first approach, Trinitarian hermeneutics may be seen as a logical outcome of ancestral Christologies.

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19 See, for instance, Clifton Clarke’s *African Christology: Jesus in Post-Missionary African Christianity* (2011), and Victor Ezigbo’s *Re-imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus in Contemporary African Christianity* (2010).

20 See, for instance, Cephas Omenyo’s brief discussion on the doctrine of charismatic renewal groups in his *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism* (2006).

The second includes the approaches which draw on African notions of relationality and communality. The third approach entails the retrieval of concepts from traditional African ontology to reinterpret the doctrine of Trinity.

### 3.3.1 *The symbol of the Trinity and ancestral analogy*

There are several attempts in Trinitarian hermeneutics to predicate on the ancestor analogy (see Bediako 2000:25–31; Nyamiti 1996; Oladipo 1996). The Tanzanian Roman Catholic priest Nyamiti (1989) developed a doctrine of the Trinity as an extension of his ancestor Christology. Nyamiti (1989:31) was convinced that ‘all truly profound theology must’ be ‘ultimately rooted in the Trinity’. Nyamiti (1984:19–20) opined that through Christ, God has become our ancestor. The ‘Father is the Ancestor of the Son, the Son is the Descendant of the Father’ and the Holy Spirit is the mutual Oblation between the two (Nyamiti 1996:55–56).<sup>21</sup> The Father is ancestor and Christ is the ‘brother-ancestor’. In this vein, Christ’s ancestorship to humanity is rooted in the Trinity. Just as there is kinship in African ancestral relation, Nyamiti (1996:46) analogously spoke of ancestral kinship amongst the persons of the Trinity.

The Nigerian theologian Oladipo (1996) similarly employs [Yoruba] ‘ancestrology’ to propose an African conception of the Trinity. According to Oladipo (1996:114–115), ‘as God “the Great ancestor” is present and active through Christ “the Proto-Ancestor”, “the Proto-ancestor” continues to be present and active through the Holy Spirit – the Grand-Ancestor’. Further to the limitations of ancestor analogy noted in my discussion of Christology above, the use of ancestor analogy in Trinitarian hermeneutics has the danger of undermining a fully Trinitarian notion of God, given the challenge of subordinationism.

## 4. Trinitarian communion as model for church and society: Relational approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity

An approach that has found wider expression amongst African theologians is the appeal to the social analogy of the Trinity,<sup>22</sup> often on the basis of

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21 Nyamiti’s pneumatology appears close to Augustine’s mutual love theory.

22 The social analogy for the Trinity may be traced back to Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173) and has recently found expression in the Trinitarian theologies of several theologians, most notably Jurgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, John Zizioulas; Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine Mowry La Cugna, amongst others. Depicting the Trinity as an intimate community, the differing accounts of social Trinitarianism portray the Trinity as a model for social relations between humans. For instance,

communal orientation of most African contexts. The late Tanzanian Roman Catholic bishop Mwoleka (1975:204) opined that the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved but rather an example to be followed. According to Mwoleka (1975), the 'three Divine Persons share everything in such a way that they are not three gods but only One'. And just as the three are one, Christ's wish is '[t]hat they (his followers) may be one as we are one'. Accordingly, he opined that the African philosophy of socialism, namely *Ujaama*, reflects the Trinity, as our understanding of the Trinity is inseparable to the sharing of life together.

Among African women theologians, Oduyoye (2000:141–145) has argued that the Trinity may be understood as offering an egalitarian model of female–male relations.<sup>23</sup> Without suggesting that the Trinity is indispensable, Oduyoye (2000) interprets the symbol of the Trinity as a model for society. Our baptism into the name of the Trinity, Oduyoye (2000:143) writes, 'means that we should stand not for monarchies and hierarchies but rather participation'. Other African women theologians critique the male language of the Trinity and argue that it not only reflects the patriarchal context in which it arose but also legitimises a male view of God, thus sustaining patriarchal relations.<sup>24</sup> The Nigerian theologian Orobator (2008) adds to this debate on the naming of God by drawing on a Yoruba maternal imagery namely *Obirinmeta*, to illumine God's pragmatic involvement in the daily existential needs of humanity. According to Orobator (2008:31), the symbol of *Obirinmeta* expresses the idea of 'a woman who combines the strength, character, personality, and beauty of three women ... She is a multifunctional woman of unmatched

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based on an articulation of an ontology of personhood predicated on relationality (being as communion), orthodox metropolitan and theologian John Zizioulas articulates an understanding of the Trinity in terms of communion, and based on this he postulates the doctrine of the Trinity as a model for human life and ecclesiality. Similarly, Jurgen Moltmann expounds implications of the social doctrine of the Trinity not only for the church but also for the broader human community. For a critique of social Trinitarianism, see Kilby (2000).

23 In western theology, the problem of language about God has been vigorously addressed by a number of feminist theologians, most notably Elizabeth Johnson, Sallie McFague and Elisabeth Fiorenza, amongst others. For fuller discussion on the feminist deconstructive critique of patriarchal Trinitarian hermeneutics, see Neal (1996). See also Johnson (1984).

24 For instance, Dube (2012) has problematised how the gender-neutral Deity of Bantu was patriarchalised in Bible translations. Other African theologians such as Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator appropriate African maternal symbols in search of a pragmatic and gender-sensitive approach to understanding how the Triune God relates with us.

density and unbounded substance'. *Obirinmeta*, Orobator (2008:32) argues, 'symbolises the abundant and radical open-endedness of God in God's self and in our encounters of God'. Although one may argue that Orobator's (2008) use of *Obirinmeta* may be interpreted as a hermeneutics of appreciation, I wonder whether a hermeneutics of suspicion may not be best employed against his project. It appears that by appropriation of this female symbol, Orobator (2008) is unwittingly affirming the status quo of women's oppression in Africa.

Another reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity that draws on the African traditional understanding of community was articulated by the Nigerian Methodist theologian Ogbonnaya (1994). Unlike Oduyoye (2000) and Mwoleka (1975), Ogbonnaya (1994:60) brings an African communal worldview to bear upon the Trinitarian thought of the early North African theologian Tertullian, who interpreted the Trinity as a theory of divine community. Dissatisfied with the monotheistic accounts of God by notable African theologians such as Idowu and Mbiti on the one hand and polytheistic descriptions of the divine opined by Godfrey Leinhardt, among others, Ogbonnaya (1994:14–27) observes that although Africans have concepts of the *One* and the *Many*, the African understanding of God is neither monotheistic nor polytheistic. Instead, he proposed the concept of 'Divine communalism' as the most apposite category for explaining the Divine in the African context. Communality, Ogbonnaya (1994:89) argues, 'is the essence of the gods in African worldviews'. He (1994:23) infers that the Divine 'is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal whilst at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions'. By foregrounding the African perspective of the communality of the Divine as a community of equality, he suggests a correlation between African communality and relationality in the Trinity. However, as Conradie and Sakupapa (2018:46) argued, Ogbonnaya's construal of 'the African community of gods as identical with Trinitarian communion' is unclear. Further, that he appears to read sub-Saharan traditional notions of communality into Tertullian's North African world is most evident in his claim that the connection Tertullian makes between *unitas* and *substantia* is closer to the Bantu notion of Vital Force. Ogbonnaya's (1994:33, 37) attempt to speak on traditional African religions and communal orientation in ancient Egypt was equally problematic. This was partly illustrated in his use of the category of identity 'African Egyptian'.<sup>25</sup> As important as the Africanity of Tertullian may be, it is also the case that in his articulation of the doctrine

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25 Compare Cheikh Anta Diop's argument that ancient Egypt was a Negro civilisation in his *The African Origin of Civilisation: Myth or Reality* (1974).



of the Trinity, Tertullian appropriated much from Greco-Roman thought. Nevertheless, although Ogbonnaya (1994) does not develop the theme of practical significance of the Trinity, he hints at a vision for human society modelled on the Divine community.

The monograph by Nigerian Lutheran theologian Bitrus (2017) is the most recent African attempt to unravel the implications of Trinitarian theology for Christian life, ecclesiology, sociopolitical life, socio-economic systems, and relations between women and men and the environment. The significance of Bitrus's (2017) Trinitarian hermeneutics lies in his reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity as a critique to patriarchal domination inherent in African communalism and the divisive challenges posed by ethnic and religious exclusivism in the African context. According to Bitrus (2017:187), 'an authentic African tradition of community is that which lives out the just, egalitarian, and inclusive life of the Triune God'. Accordingly, Bitrus (2017:56–159) reinterprets Trinitarian relationality as a moral model.

#### 4.1 God as the Great Muntu: The Trinity and African metaphysics of Ntu

Another approach to the Trinity in contemporary African theology entails the retrieval of African concepts to express the Trinity. Kombo's (2007) work is instructive in this regard. Kombo's point of departure is that pioneer African theologians had not sufficiently pondered the discontinuities between Christian and pre-Christian African understandings of God. Kombo (2007:208) wonders how God as *Modimo*, *Nyame*, *Leza* and *Nyasaye* is the Triune God? For Kombo (2007:232), what is needed is Christianisation of the African notion of God. To do so, he suggested employing an African intellectual infrastructure to explain the Christianised concept, just as the early church Fathers did when they utilised the infrastructure of Greek philosophy. Therefore, drawing on an African ethnophilosophy<sup>26</sup> dubbed the metaphysics of *Ntu*, Kombo (2007) recasts the doctrine of the Trinity in other than Greek categories. Accordingly, Kombo (2007:243) names God as the Great *Muntu*, the Supreme Vital Force. The Great *Muntu*, Kombo (2007) argues, 'has oneness of *Ntu* and activity with the Son and the Holy Spirit':

*The 'genuine Muntu' that the Son has, is the 'Great Muntu' himself. Thus, the Son is a perfect reflection of the 'Great Muntu', the Holy Spirit*

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26 His interlocutors for the metaphysics of *Ntu* include Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame and Mulagowa Cikala to the notion of vital force. For a discussion of vital force as an African notion being, see Sakupapa (2012).

*is a perfect reflection of the 'Great Muntu', and the Father is a perfect reflection of the 'Great Muntu' (Kombo 2007:245).*

The originality of Kombo's (2007) work, notwithstanding his reinterpretation of the Trinity, seems to be a reinstatement of the western cultural articulation of the Trinity 'forced' to fit into terminology derived from the traditional African context. His formulations at times read like an 'African equivalent of Western dogmatic formulations' (Bediako 2004:159). Further, Kombo's (2007:236–247) description of Trinitarian fatherhood corresponds to a patriarchal model of the Trinity that depicts the Father as a source of divine community, thus tending towards subordinationism. Nevertheless, Kombo's (2007) originality in employing an African metaphysics is commendable, given its contribution to the debate on the problem of the language of person in Trinitarian theology. This is crucial to demonstrate that although some African theologians such as Mugambi (1995) have argued that the notion of 'person' in the Trinity is misleading (to an African) and must be discarded, the problem of the language of person is not a typically African problem.<sup>27</sup> The history of dogma illustrates that the development of the classic doctrine of the Trinity was a creative process that not only included linguistic borrowings but also that the language and grammar of Trinitarian theology was developed in the context of debate. Therefore, there is no reason why African theologians cannot introduce new terms if these are consistent with scripture. As Kombo (2016:46) argues: 'The actual nexus for any meaningful discourse on the doctrine of the Trinity ... is when we state in our own terms what we believe the Bible teaches.'

## 5. Conclusion

This contribution situated the modern African theological debate on the identity of God in the encounter of African Christians with the western translation of God through various missionary theologies. It highlighted three main approaches to Trinitarian hermeneutics in the African context. One may conclude that most African perspectives to the Trinity adopted

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<sup>27</sup> For instance, unsatisfied with the modern sense of the concept 'person', namely 'a self-conscious will and activity center', to describe the traditional Trinitarian formula, Barth and Rahner (1974:103–115) suggested the notions of 'modes of being' (Seinsweisen) and 'distinct modes of subsisting' respectively. Some however argue that Barth and Rahner's positions in this regard represent a 'neo-modal Trinity model'. For Kasper (2012), what is needed is a concept of person that stresses relationality. Among others, Zizioulas's (1991b) thesis on the ontology of person is instructive.

the social analogy of the Trinity to draw implications of the doctrine for Christian life and society. The attempt to place the symbol of the Triune God in the public sphere (often on the basis of African communality and relationality) illustrates the importance of the social context in African theological method. However, the approach has its own limitations, as discussed above. As Conradie and Sakupapa (2018) argue, one of the challenges is that the

*social implications derived from such an emphasis on communion are read into an understanding of communion without due cognisance of hierarchical relationships in terms of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation and being able-bodied (Conradie & Sakupapa 2018:50).*

Nevertheless, there is no given Trinitarian symbolism that could fully capture the mystery of God. At best, 'the confession of God as Triune serves as the doxological conclusion of the liturgy' (Conradie & Sakupapa 2018:53).

# The Trinity in African Public Theology

Nico Koopman

## 1. Introduction

This article argues that public theology is indeed a theological endeavour. The central task of public theology concerns reflection upon the meaning and implication of Trinitarian faith for public life. Public life has in mind the three publics that David Tracy<sup>1</sup> so eloquently defines, namely, the public of the church, the public of the academy and the public of society. This article reflects upon the task, role and mode of public theology in each one of these publics.

First, this article outlines the challenges that face public theology in South Africa and, more widely, on the continent of Africa. To understand the challenges for public theology in South Africa, not only South Africa's vast peculiar challenges should be attended to, but the rest of the continent should also be taken into consideration. South Africa is an essential part of Africa; economically it contributes thirty percent of Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and politically it is one of the most stable and thriving democracies on the continent. The challenges on the rest of the continent are essentially part of the challenges for South Africa. Secondly, this article discusses the role and task of public theology in the three publics of academy, church and society. Finally, the article suggests contours for a Trinitarian approach to public theology, in which, lessons are learned from the Trinitarian planetary theology of Sallie McFague.

## 2. Public theology in a context of immense challenges

The people of Africa face major challenges, perhaps in more severe forms than people living on other continents. We experience economic and political suffering and injustices and abuses; we are faced with diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria; alienations and injustices such as sexism, racism and xenophobia, as well as violence and crime; natural disasters; abusive cultural practices and high levels of hopelessness amidst the courage indeed to never give up. The overview that follows is

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1 Tracy 1981.

not extensive and penetrating but aims to give some cursory orientation regarding the context in which public theology in South Africa is practised.

## 2.1 Economy

First, many (South) Africans are victims of the growing gap between the rich and the poor: the so-called rich north and poor south; rich neighbourhoods and poor neighbourhoods; rich blacks and poor blacks; rich family members and poor family members. The gap between rich and poor in Africa is the highest in the world and is manifested among various countries in Africa; hence the significance of the fact that South Africa alone contributes thirty percent of the GDP of Africa. Similarly, this inequality is witnessed also in the fact that, whereas South Africa's per capita income was \$3310 in 1998, Mozambique's was \$210 and that of Lesotho was \$570.

Together with Brazil, South Africa is the country with the biggest gap between rich and poor in the world. In 1993 the richest ten percent of the population received 47.3% of the income, whereas the poorest forty percent of the people had only a 9.1% share. At the same time, seventy percent of the rural population lived on fourteen percent of the land.<sup>2</sup> A South African economist, Sampie Terreblanche, is of the opinion that the overall situation has not changed drastically, especially for the poorest of the poor. He refers to the 2000 report of Statistics South Africa, which states that in 1996 at least 41.4% of all households lived in poverty; that is, they had to live with an income of between 601 and 1000 rand. He also refers to other statistics that paints an even gloomier picture.<sup>3</sup> He makes the point that unemployment has increased in democratic South Africa;<sup>4</sup> for instance, in 1995, two-thirds of black people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four were unemployed.<sup>5</sup> Many researchers argue that this figure has not changed for the better during the last few years. The economic liberation of black people is mainly limited to a new, growing, black elite. South African theologian, Tinyiko Maluleke, argues that economic liberation has not dawned for the poor masses of South Africa.<sup>6</sup> He also protests that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, did not take economic liberation and reparation seriously enough.<sup>7</sup>

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2 Barnett & Whiteside 2006:144, 165.

3 Terreblanche 2002:383, 412.

4 Ibid. 407.

5 Ibid. 374.

6 Maluleke 1996.

7 Ibid. 1997.

The poverty levels in Africa are the highest in the world, with thirty-two of the United Nations least developed countries being found in sub-Saharan Africa. This region's total income is not much more than that of Belgium. The median GDP of the 48 countries in the region of just over two billion dollars is about equal to the output of a town of sixty thousand people in a rich country. Even though South Africa contributes thirty percent of Africa's GDP, it contributes only one percent to the GDP of the world.<sup>8</sup> According to Meredith, the average national per capita income of Africans is one-third lower than the world's next poorest region, South Asia. What is also disturbing is his statement that this per capita income is now lower than it was in 1980, and for some countries, in 1960. Africa contributes less than two percent to the trade which is now half of what it was in the 1980s, amounting to only 1.6 percent. Africa's share of global investments is less than one percent.<sup>9</sup> Meredith argues that the unfair subsidies of western governments for their farmers, as well as their strict tariff barriers, exercise a crippling effect on African producers. Agricultural subsidies in these countries amount to 370 billion dollars per annum; that is, a sum that is higher than the GDP of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. These policies, subsidies and tariffs lead to low prices and unfair competition between African and western farmers. The subsidies, which are higher than the value of an entire crop, enable US farmers to sell products such as cotton for one-third of the production costs, while the related losses suffered by specifically West African countries is more than the development aid they receive from the US government.<sup>10</sup>

Many people in this country and on our continent are indeed excluded from the benefits of globalisation. The North American theologian, Mark Amstutz, outlines the achievements of the global market economy; he cites the statistics of the World Bank on the improvement of living conditions in the thirty-seven poorest countries of the world, between 1965 and 1985, as proof of the success of the market economy:

1. *The annual crude death rate per thousand declined from 17 to 10.*
2. *Owing largely to a decline in the fertility rate, the annual crude birth rate per thousand people declined from 43 to 29.*
3. *Average life expectancy increased from 47 to 60 years for men and from 50 to 61 years for women.*
4. *Infant mortality for children under one year declined from 127 per thousand to 72 per thousand.*

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8 Barnett & Whiteside [note 477] 139.

9 Meredith 2006:681–682.

10 Ibid. 684–685.

5. *The child death rate for children aged 1–4 declined from 19 per thousand to 9 per thousand.*
6. *Average daily caloric supply per capita also increased – from 2046 to 2339.7.*
7. *Finally, the average percentage of children in primary schools increased from 74 to 97 and in secondary schools from 21 to 32.<sup>11</sup>*

## 2.2 Refugees

Secondly, many Africans are refugees as a result of civil war and the breakdown of economic and social Africa. This number constitutes forty percent of the total number of refugees in the world.<sup>12</sup> It is situations like the one in Zimbabwe that cause people to flee their countries and seek new futures, especially in a country like South Africa. Meredith describes the shocking state as follows:

*By the end of the 1990s Zimbabwe was in dire straits. The unemployment rate had risen to more than 50 per cent. Only one-tenth of the number of pupils leaving school were able to find formal employment. Inflation had reached 60 per cent. The value of wages in real terms had fallen over ten years by 22 per cent. On average, the population of 13 million was 10 per cent poorer at the end of the 1990s than at the beginning. More than 70 per cent lived in abject poverty. Hospitals were short of drugs and equipment; government schools were starved of funds; state corporations were bankrupt; the public transport system was decrepit; fuel supplies were erratic; scores of businesses had closed. Harare, once renowned as one of the cleanest cities in Africa, was noted for debris on the pavements, cracked cement pavings, broken streetlights, potholes, uncollected refuse and burst pipelines. Street crime was endemic.<sup>13</sup>*

## 2.3 Health

Africa is a continent with various major diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and especially AIDS. Although the HIV/AIDS pandemic is growing in various parts of the world, such as India and China, it is mainly manifested in Africa, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa; of the 39.4 million people who lived with HIV/AIDS during 2004, 25.4 were living in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2004, 3.1 million people in sub-Saharan Africa became

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11 Amstutz 1995:822.

12 Meredith [note 484] 679.

13 Ibid. [note 484] 634–635.



newly infected with HIV; of the 3.1 million AIDS-related deaths in 2004, 2.3 million were Africans; and a total of seventeen million Africans have already died of AIDS. There is a total of 12.3 million orphans, the result of AIDS, in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>14</sup> Barnett and Whiteside give one of the best outlines of the causes, growth, effects, impact on family and social and economic life, as well as the treatment and prognosis of HIV/AIDS in various countries and regions of the world. They also describe the impact of other diseases, including malaria, which killed a million Africans in 2004, ninety percent of whom were children.<sup>15</sup>

#### 2.4 Racism

The levels of racism in South Africa and the rest of the continent are still very high; in spite of some progress, racism between black and white is still prevalent at both subtle and explicit, visible levels. Tinyiko Maluleke refers to the story of the teenager, Happy Sindane, who has white physical features and was brought up by black foster parents. He gained public dominance when he started to search for his biological parents, whom he assumed were white. The discovery that he was not white was, according to Maluleke, not based on scientific DNA testing, the texture of his hair or the tone of his skin. His blackness was confirmed in the media, since he demonstrated, as far as white and black journalists were concerned, the typical stereotypes that they held, consciously and unconsciously, of black people; hence, Happy Sindane is thought to be unhygienic, delinquent, criminal, cheating and immoral. The public debate about the status of Happy Sindane reflects, according to Maluleke, existing racial prejudices and practices in South Africa.<sup>16</sup> Meredith observes that the policies of Robert Mugabe have dashed the hope for racial harmony in Zimbabwe, causing mutual mistrust and suspicion.<sup>17</sup>

#### 2.5 Religion

It should be noted also that religion plays a major role in many conflicts in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Moreover, even in countries such as South Africa, where there is a strong culture of respect, dialogue and cooperation among various religions, people are nevertheless exposed to the religious fundamentalism, absolutism, moralism and judgementalism of some fellow-Christians and some people of other religions.

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14 Barnett & Whiteside [note 477] 9–10, 140.

15 Ibid. 142.

16 Maluleke [note 481] 114–116.

17 Meredith [note 484] 627.

## 2.6 Xenophobia

Many citizens in African countries, who feel threatened by citizens (refugees and immigrants) of other countries in their struggle for daily socio-economic survival, engage in practices of subtle and explicit xenophobia. This is increasingly the case in South Africa, which is to a large extent the economic engine room of Africa.

## 2.7 Sexism

This country and continent are plagued by various forms of sexual violence and sexism. Maluleke refers to the fact that South Africa has the highest rape figure in the world: 119 reported rapes per hundred thousand people. Sexual injustice is expressed in the silence of men and in the controversial debate over whether a 'rapex' may be developed as a measure to limit HIV infection via an act of rape. A 'rapex' is a so-called female condom that is intended to be inserted into the vagina as part of a woman's daily security routine; during sexual intercourse it hooks onto the rapist's penis and must be surgically removed.<sup>18</sup>

Besides misogyny, homophobia is another face of sexism in Africa. Leaders like Robert Mugabe and former Namibian president Sam Nujoma even expressed their homophobic convictions publicly, and thereby, perhaps unintentionally, encouraged homophobic practices in their countries.

## 2.8 Crime

Africa is also exposed to high levels of crime and corruption. Sampie Terreblanche attributes the escalation of violent crime in South Africa to, among other issues, the systemic violence of apartheid. According to Terreblanche, the systemic violence, especially during the forty-six years of apartheid, has deeply ingrained the inclination towards violent and criminal behaviour among impoverished South Africans. The violent defence of, as well as resistance against, apartheid fed a culture of violence; during the resistance against apartheid the laws of illegitimate governments were defied, and many who had already been marginalised and criminalised by poverty and coercive labour patterns became involved in organised violence and criminality. Moreover, during apartheid, the police concentrated mainly on protecting an illegitimate political system, often by violent means; consequently a culture of lawlessness, criminality and violence, including gang violence, was able to flourish in underprivileged communities. By the time of the birth of a new post-

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18 Maluleke [note 481] 116–117.

apartheid society, the subculture of lawlessness, criminality and violence had become thoroughly entrenched, paving the way for an escalation in violent crime in South Africa. Likewise, the violent system of colonialism, with the accompanying impoverishment and dehumanisation, has had the same impact in terms of violent crime in other countries on the continent. However, apartheid and colonialism are not the only causes of violent crime; human selfishness, greed and pride in the context of growing consumerism are further causes of criminal violence.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.9 Ecology

Various environmental problems are experienced on the continent of Africa, including various forms of pollution, deforestation, desertification, extinction of various life forms and exhaustion of crucial natural resources. What raises concern is the fact that these ecological challenges do not receive adequate attention in crucial visionary documents, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights and the more recent South African Bill of Rights, as well as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) that articulates the heart of the agenda of the African Union; hence, even when the South African Bill of Rights mentions ecological considerations, it is not for the sake of the integrity of the environment itself, but for the sake of humans.

In addition, Barnett and Whiteside suggest that natural disasters in Africa, specifically floods and droughts, will increase, since Africa is vulnerable to climatic change. Moreover, these processes will increase desertification on the continent, leading to even fewer agricultural opportunities on top of the already very high levels of starvation, famine and under- and malnutrition.<sup>20</sup>

## 2.10 Culture

Abusive cultural practices constitute another major challenge in African contexts.<sup>21</sup> Potential abusive cultural practices are, among others, female genital cutting, which violates the dignity of women despite the claim that it teaches youngsters about the suffering dimension of life; newer forms of polygamy that do not take seriously the consent of the first wife, the covenantal character of polygamous marriages, the wellbeing of the extended family, or single women who want to get married to be taken care of at least economically; older forms of polygamy that do not take

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19 Terreblanche [note 478] 42, 401–402.

20 Barnett & Whiteside [note 477] 252–253.

21 For a discussion of these practices see B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (2003:162–75).

the plights and desires of especially the first older wife into consideration; incest that is justified as a means to avoid mixing blood with presumed inferior outsiders; sorcery that is motivated by greed, jealousy and hatred and that demonises persons for various reasons; and birthing more children than a woman's health can tolerate, for the sake of reflecting prosperity and wealth, on the grounds that children will eventually take care of the parents.

### 2.11 Hopelessness

All these challenges cause, as can be expected, hopelessness among many people, confirmed by the fact that the situation may not be any better for our children: many Africans experience lack of access to formal education; Africa is the only continent where school enrolment is decreasing and where illiteracy is still commonplace; two out of every five Africans, and half of all African women, are illiterate.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, many youngsters experience hopelessness: due to socio-economic and related factors. They may not be able to complete school education; even if they pass, their results may not be good enough to pave the way for entering higher education or the job market. The desperate situation of school children contributes to problems like drug abuse, the formation of violent gangs, the imitation of 'wrong' role models, teenage pregnancies, a lack of discipline, and violent behaviour from a relatively young age.

## 3. Public theology and the academy

After this overview of some challenges in South Africa and the rest of the continent, we turn to a discussion of the publics with which public theology is engaged, with these public aims to serve the development of appropriate responses to the various challenges above.<sup>23</sup>

According to Tracy, the academy is the public or social location where serious, critical scientific enquiry, by various disciplines, takes place.<sup>24</sup> In its engagement with the academy, theology is challenged to provide arguments that people from diverse religious and secular traditions can recognise as reasonable. In this discourse, appeals are made to universal categories; such as experience, intelligence, rationality and responsibility, while claims are stated with appropriate warrants, backings and rebuttal procedures. Tracy also pleads that, although theologians confess allegiance

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22 Meredith [note 484] 682.

23 The discussion of the three publics draws from earlier work on this theme. See, among others, Nico Koopman 'Theology and the Fulfilment of Social and Economic Rights: Some Theoretical Considerations' (2005).

24 See Tracy [note 476] 56–59.

to a specific religious tradition or to a praxis movement bearing religious significance, they abstract themselves from these faith commitments for the sake of critical analysis of their religious and theological claims, both by outsiders and adherents to the religious tradition. Such abstraction implies dis-involvement and a quest for objectivity in a logical positivist fashion; hence, the critical self-introspection takes place along the lines that the Dutch systematic theologian, Gijsbert van den Brink, proposes.<sup>25</sup>

With an appeal to the paradigm theories of Thomas Kühn, he outlines support for later developments in the philosophy of science discourse that make room for adherence to particularistic commitments in the scientific endeavour. Although he recognises that there is much to be learned from older important philosophies of science, it remains his conviction that these approaches do not take the significant and determinative particularistic influences, such as faith commitments, of scientists seriously enough.<sup>26</sup>

In all publics, perhaps more so in the academy, public theology opts for scientific reflection, for making faith convictions as far as possible rationally accessible to all reasonable people and for constructing arguments that pass the test of coherency, consistency and logical reasoning. Theology, however, does not have to distance itself from its faith commitments, so long as it takes care that such commitments do not exclude scientific scrutiny. Anselm's notion of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) needs fresh application in the contemporary engagement of theology with the academic public.

Theology supports and participates in the quest of academia to build societies of dignity and humanness. In South Africa, as in the rest of Africa, the academy is challenged to participate in crucial transformation processes. There is an immense danger, however, that appeal for public involvement in the academy will favour pragmatism and utilitarianism to the extent that disciplines which seemingly do not contribute directly to economic development, for instance, will be viewed as inferior, worthless

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25 See G. van den Brink, *Een publieke zaak: Theologie tussen geloof en wetenschap* (2004).

26 Van den Brink [note 500] reasons that, despite their weaknesses, older philosophies of science still pose some important challenges. Logical positivism challenges us to ensure that cognitively meaningful statements be verifiable as far as possible; confirmationism teaches us that it is much more difficult to confirm so-called non-existence statements than existence statements; the falsification theory of Karl Popper challenges us to open ourselves to criticism, to continuous disturbance and critical opposition by researchers who do not just take our positions for granted. See Van den Brink 2004:219–221.

and of no use. Yet, if human dignity, development and humaneness are viewed as comprehensive categories that include all dimensions of social and natural life, the contribution of all disciplines will be acknowledged and appreciated. Thus, the academy has to guard against, on the one hand, the extremes of ivory tower scientific practices that do not enhance human dignity and, on the other hand, pragmatism, economisation and the commodification of life, and the adoption of commercial utility as the supreme norm for academic practice.

Gavin D'Costa spells out the central place of universities in church and society and, consequently, the importance of theology's involvement with the academy:

*I claim that Christian culture and civilization are at stake if we do not attend to the nature of the university, a major institution that fosters the cultural and intellectual life of nations and trains the intelligentsia of the ecclesia. No doubt, government and big business are important as are civic societies (like churches, mosques, temples, baseball clubs, music societies, and so on), but all these groups get their intelligentsia from the universities and in this sense the intellectual life of nations finds its primary nourishment in its universities.<sup>27</sup>*

Public theology is challenged to journey with the academy as a crucial partner which will jointly fulfil the calling of academic life to build societies and environments of dignity, justice and joy. Further, the unique contribution of theology as an academic discipline is not limited to the provision of meaning-giving frameworks for life and scientific practices, neither is it limited to spelling out visions of the good life, nor is it confined to offering an idea of the wonderful *telos* of all life in terms of religious convictions. Academic theology also makes indispensable contributions to the contents of discourses. Theology can, for instance, deepen and strengthen justice discourse by appealing to Jewish and Christian traditions which argue that justice cannot be understood and adequately enhanced without the notions of compassion, sacrifice and justification. Justice is therefore always sacrificial, compassionate, restorative justice.

#### 4. Public theology and society

South African theologian, Dirkie Smit, offers a helpful description of modern democratic societies.<sup>28</sup> He is of the opinion that modern societies

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27 D'Costa 2005:215.

28 See Smit, 'Oor die unieke openbare rol van die kerk' (1996).

consists of four spheres: the political and economic spheres, as well as the spheres of civil society and public opinion-formation.<sup>29</sup>

The political sphere focuses on the state, government, political power and the control and regulating of public life. The economic sphere entails aspects such as the so-called autonomous market-economy, globalisation, ecology, science and technology. Civil society focuses on themes relating to the relationship between theology and, among others, the institutions, organisations, associations and movements of civil society that, independently from the state and the economy, strive to enhance the quality of life, satisfy needs, and foster the interests of people, changing the nature of society and building a common good, that is, a life of quality for all. Schools, legal bodies, cultural and sports clubs and the neighbourhood are all institutions of civil society, and from a sociological perspective, churches are also a part of civil society. The area of public opinion-formation focuses on themes such as the nature of society, common foundational values for society, common challenges and common priorities for society, whereby the ensuing public opinion paves the way for jointly striving towards the common good.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Tracy [note 476] divides the public of society into three spheres; namely, the realm of the technoeconomic structure that deals with the organization and allocation of goods and services; the realm of the polity, where the aim is to embody social justice in the traditions and institutions of society, through the legitimate use of power and force and the regulation of conflict within the rule of law; the realm of culture, including art and religion, which explores and expresses the meaning and values of individual, group and communal existence. See Tracy 1981:6–14.

30 Smit's distinctions coincide with the distinctions of Jürgen Habermas. For him the democratic public consists of four spheres. The first sphere has at its centre: government, civil service, judiciary, parliament, political parties, elections and party competition; outside this core system, but still belonging to the state, is an inner periphery of institutions (such as regulatory agencies) with powers delegated by the state. The second public sphere, which is part of the outer periphery, is organizations that Habermas calls customers; that is, business associations, labour unions and private organizations. The third public sphere, which is also part of the outer periphery, consists of organizations that he calls the suppliers; that is, voluntary associations, churches, new social movements and public interest groups. Fourthly, he makes room for the public opinion that is formed by the dialogue of public interest groups and professionals who, as the sensors of society, identify, draw attention to and interpret social problems and who, with the aid of the media, propose solutions and apply pressure that can bring forth change that will better the situation of especially the disadvantaged. See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (1996).



The dialogue and cooperation of theology with these spheres takes place in appropriate modes. In this regard, the typology of James Gustafson is helpful; he identifies four varieties of moral discourse that suggest four ways in which theology can engage with these spheres: prophetic discourse, narrative discourse, ethical or technical discourse and policy discourse.<sup>31</sup> Prophetic discourse takes on the form of indictment and utopia, where indictment points to the roots of moral or social problems and utopian discourse evokes a hopeful vision, proclaiming an ideal state of affairs in the future that allures and motivates people towards its realisation. In narrative discourse, stories and parables are told of significant events and of moral heroes in the community and tradition, sustaining the common memory and shaping the conscience and moral identities and characters of the members of the community. Thus, more than a rigorous casuistic argument, stories provide illumination and help in the process of moral decision-making. Ethical or technical discourse uses philosophical and rigorous modes of moral argumentation, employing logic, precise distinctions and clear definition of concepts such as justice and rights, and it identifies the rational grounds of autonomous ethics; this may be supported by Christian convictions that can be shared with non-believers. Policy discourse is the discourse of the policy and decision-makers in society, dealing with questions about what is desirable within the constraints of what is possible, whether we have power to affect change, what the time frame is for the achievement of ends, whether we have all the necessary information and knowledge, and so on. Consequently, policy discourse entails that we have to distinguish between matters of ethical principle and the inferences we draw for policy; there is more certainty about the former than the latter.

In the engagement of theology with these sectors of society, attention is to be given to all these discourses. The vision of an alternative society that energises and opens innovative possibilities should be spelled out.<sup>32</sup> Clear critique where injustices exist should be voiced. The grassroots

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31 Gustafson, *An Analysis of Church and Society Social Ethical Writings* (1988:267–78); Gustafson, *Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical and Policy* (1988); Gustafson, *Moral Discourse about Medicine: A Variety of Forms* (1990).

32 Envisioning opens up creative, innovative and surprising possibilities that technical reflection alone cannot. Biblical Studies scholar, Walter Brueggemann (1978:13), argues that envisioning enables us to see new possibilities that are in contrast to the dominant gloom. Vision creates hope in situations of despair and energy where people feel powerless. Vision, on the other hand, also helps us to be clearly aware of the shortcomings of our endeavours and policies; vision opens the door for courageous and constructive criticism. Various forms of the church help

stories of poverty, suffering and the violation of dignity are to be heard, but also the stories of smaller achievements and successes. The technical discourse is of immense importance; it suggests that it is not enough to spell out broad principles and visions of dignity and justice, since the hard work of critical, scientific, interdisciplinary and intersectional analysis and deliberation that can lead to jointly reached preliminary solutions is of crucial importance. Engagement with these various discourses paves the way for appropriate interventions in the policy-making processes on different levels of governance and authority in different spheres of society.<sup>33</sup>

In engaging these spheres, it is important that theology resists the temptation to fulfil the role of being merely a watchdog of society, engaging only in the prophetic discourse of critique and indictment. In the same vein, theology that merely spells out the vision of a good society is not responsible.<sup>34</sup>

The road of partnership that institutions such as the South African Council of Churches currently opt for is perhaps the most fruitful path to follow. In this cooperation, it is important that theology should not be co-opted by the agenda of the state.<sup>35</sup> A guiding principle for this cooperation is

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to develop this vision of an alternative society. For example, Stanley Hauerwas argues that ethicists function like artists: what they see determines not only their choices and actions but also who they are; in other words, we are and we do what we see. Vision determines ethics. See Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (1974); *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (1977); *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (1981); *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (1983) and various other works.

33 Theology's dialogue and interaction with broader spheres of society occurs mainly through the denominational and ecumenical church. There are instances where theologians make direct input in their personal and professional capacities, such as, in ethical committees of hospitals and ethical committees in the business and public media sectors as well as parliamentary portfolio committees. The bulk of inputs are, however, made through church bodies. The remarks made here are, therefore, also relevant to the section on the institutional church below.

34 For an analysis of the prophetic task of churches in the context of poverty in a democratic society, see Nico Koopman, *Freedom of Religion and the Prophetic Role of the Church* (2002); *Let the Plight of the Poor Be Heard: Prophetic Speaking about Poverty Today* (2004).

35 For a description of the danger of Constantinianism, see Nico Koopman, *Tussen die duiwel van Konstantinisme en die diep blou see van sektarisme – kerk en staat verhouding in postapartheid Suid-Afrika* (2001) The concept Constantinianism refers to any co-option of the church by the agenda of the state.

to ask continually what the impact of dialogue, cooperation, compromises and policies is on poor and vulnerable people. One of the most cherished notions in Christian theology, recalled by liberation theology between the 1960s and 1980s, is the conviction that God is in a special way the God of the poor, the destitute and the wronged. The acid test for our social and economic discourses, policies and priorities rests on the question of how they impact on the most vulnerable in society.<sup>36</sup>

The engagement of theology with political institutions, business and trade unions, sport and cultural bodies, schools and other organs of civil society, such as different forms of the modern communication media, within the parameters, modes and styles outlined above, may prove to be fruitful for building human and natural societies of peace, justice and dignity.

## 5. Public theology and the church

To understand the use of the word 'church' in public theological discourse, Dirkie Smit once again offers a valuable typology, identifying six forms of the church.<sup>37</sup> The first four forms constitute the church as institution; they are worship services, local congregations with their various practices, denominations, and ecumenical bodies. The other two forms constitute the church as organism: namely, individual Christians in their normal daily roles in family, work, neighbourhood and so on, as well as individual Christians in voluntary organisations.

### 5.1 Worship services

Worship services have the potential to transform people into just people, who can enhance the social and economic transformation of society. The impact of worship on ethics, including economic ethics, is treasured increasingly by a growing number of authors; in particular, the recent collection edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells makes a plea for an end to the separation of worship and ethics that came to the fore under the influence of Immanuel Kant. From their different perspectives, authors demonstrate how worship impacts on ethical choices, policies and moral living in various walks of life, specifically also in the area of social and economic justice.<sup>38</sup> While the transformative, subversive and

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36 For an extensive discussion of the notion that God is in a special way the God of the poor and the destitute, see Nico Koopman, ... *In a Special Way: The God of the Poor, the Destitute and the Wronged: A Basic and Neglected Conviction of (Reformed) Theology?* (2002).

37 See Smit, *Oor die kerk as unieke samelewingsverband* (1996).

38 See Hauerwas & Wells *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (2004).

revolutionary potential of worship services is being investigated by an increasing number of theologians, those participating in worship see alternative realities that are in conflict with the beforehand realities of a world where injustice reigns supreme; thus, they are transformed to participate in the building of these alternative realities. Those who pray for daily bread see a world where there is bread for everyone, and they participate in creating such a world.

## 5.2 Practices of congregations

Various practices of congregations also enhance the fulfilment of social and economic rights. A definition of Christian practices, according to Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass is: 'things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world'.<sup>39</sup> That is, 'practices' refers to cooperative and meaningful human endeavours in which certain beliefs, virtues and skills are intertwined with certain behaviours, relationships and symbols.<sup>40</sup> Examples of such practices are baptism, Holy Communion, worship, prayer, singing, catechesis, public witness, deaconate, and various dialogues.

## 5.3 Denominations and ecumenical bodies

Denominations and ecumenical bodies can embark on the so-called priestly task of showing solidarity with the marginalised and the wronged; care, compassion and solidarity are expressed in the various diaconal services of the churches. Denominations and ecumenical bodies also fulfil the prophetic task of clearly spelling out the vision of a good society where people enjoy a life of dignity and justice, which involves constructively critiquing societies that do not meet the conditions of a good society, through declarations of faith, and even confessions of faith. In addition, churches at both the denominational and the ecumenical level have the responsibility for intervening in public policy processes to ensure that laws are formulated that will enhance the vision and ideals of justice and dignity, as found in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution and the principles of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.<sup>41</sup>

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39 Dykstra & Bass 2002:18.

40 Ibid. 19–21.

41 J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Perspectives on Politics* (2000:264–273), summarises the public responsibility of churches as follows: influence the public ethos; educate the church's membership about particular public issues; participate in advocacy and lobbying initiatives; support specific political parties and candidates with positive records on civil rights and other social justice issues; encourage lay Christians to

#### 5.4 Individual Christians

Individual Christians in their normal daily roles and in voluntary organisations are equipped by the institutional church to participate in appropriate ways in various sectors of society, so that a life of dignity is advanced. The institutional church, through its worship services, congregational practices, denominational and ecumenical policies, declarations, confessional statements and public actions and witnesses, contributes to the transformation of individual Christians into people who live with specific virtues. According to J. Philip Wogaman, a virtue is a tendency and predisposition to be and to act in accordance with goodness.<sup>42</sup> Virtues are incarnate, embodied, practised values.<sup>43</sup> When the virtues, with their personal and public dimensions, are cherished and developed, a significant contribution is made towards the material realisation of a life of dignity for all.<sup>44</sup>

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establish a Christian political party, if circumstances warrant this move; engage in truly extreme situations of oppression in civil disobedience and participate in even violent revolutions. The contentious nature of some of these proposals is obvious.

42 See J. Philip Wogaman *Christian Moral Judgment* (1988), especially chapter 2.

43 The Christian tradition formulated seven virtues: four of them are borrowed from Greek philosophical thinking, specifically from Aristotle, and are called the cardinal virtues; including justice. Justice entails that people embody fairness, commitment to a life of equality, dignity and joy for all; just people are even willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the other. The other three cardinal virtues are: temperance, discernment or wisdom and fortitude or courage. The three theological virtues that complete the list of seven Christian virtues are faith, hope and love. All these virtues impact on a life of social and economic justice and dignity for all. For very helpful accounts of the virtues see, besides the works mentioned above about approaches to moral decision-making, S. Hauerwas and C. Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (1997) and N. Richardson, *Ethics of Character and Community* (1994).

44 Recently much work has been done in the field of moral and virtue formation, with both the theological and anthropological dimensions of these processes being investigated. For a general orientation to the process of moral formation, see N. Koopman and R. Vosloo, *Die ligtheid van die lig: Morele oriëntasie in 'n postmoderne tyd* (2002). For a very helpful description of the various modes of moral formation, see J. van der Ven, *Formation of the Moral Self* (1998). He identifies seven modes of moral formation: discipline, socialization, value transmission, value clarification, moral development, emotional development and character formation.

## 6. Public theology as Trinitarian theology

Our analysis thus far demonstrates that engagement with the challenges on the African continent, and cooperation with the three publics, is taking place from an explicit theological perspective. A Trinitarian perspective entails reflection on the meaning and significance of faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for these challenges and in these publics.

### 6.1 Trinitarian perspective

The Trinitarian perspective helps us to view the various social, political, economic, ecological, sexual, medical, cultural and personal challenges of our context as moral challenges; that is, they are connected to the wellbeing, wholeness and joy of people and the rest of God's creation. Moreover, a Trinitarian approach enables us to view these challenges as theological challenges which are, at heart, related to God; thus, how we describe them, how we prioritise them, how we respond to them and whether or not we take ownership of them reflects faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God, obedience or disobedience, holy or unholy living and trust or distrust of God.

A Trinitarian theological engagement with these challenges in and through the three publics of contemporary South Africa and the rest of Africa can perhaps be described by the famous Christian triad of faith, hope and love: faith expresses the foundation and anchor of our lives in something that happened in the past; hope articulates the joyous future, *telos*, purposes and ends of our lives because of what is yet to come; love reflects the present life of service and compassion on the basis of our past and future realities via remembrance of the past and expectation of the future. People who adhere to a Trinitarian faith are people who remember, and they are people who wait, who sigh and who long for the new. Public theology reflects upon a faith that remembers the triune God: what God has done in the past, what God will do in future and what God is doing currently.

### 6.2 Planetary theology

In her construction of public theology as planetary theology, Sally McFague employs a Trinitarian approach to theology that offers some contours for doing public theology from a Trinitarian perspective. Her work is valuable since she focuses on the public dimension of Trinitarian faith; both God and the world are crucial for her. In particular, her focus on ecological liberation is inclusive of the liberation of human beings; that is, she does not function with a dualism regarding the salvation of nature and humans. Rather, her model of planetary theology has the salvation of the whole

universe in mind. This inclusive and comprehensive understanding of liberation and salvation makes her thoughts on Trinitarian faith important and interesting. In addition, her work is helpful because it does not ethicise Trinitarian faith or draw blueprints from it for public life; instead, she strives rightly to discover a vision for public life from her Trinitarian faith. While the following brief outline does not entail a thorough critique of her position, its portrayal is sufficient for drawing out some guidelines for a Trinitarian public theology in (South) African contexts.

McFague pleads for a theological engagement with questions of justice and the integrity of creation; in fact, for McFague, theology is public by nature. She states: 'It is not enough that a Christian theology be meaningful to an individual; it must, if it is to be Christian, speak of God's love for the world and whether that world is flourishing as God wishes it to.'<sup>45</sup> Doing theology entails, according to McFague, having a narrative, first-order experience of God to start with. We reflect upon that narrative and we articulate what we believe in a personal credo; a personal, thoughtful expression of an individual's deepest beliefs on which she or he is prepared to act.<sup>46</sup> Then, the faith that is articulated in the credo is understood in the context of the public challenges that we face.

For McFague, Trinitarian thinking does not deal only with the question regarding Jesus of Nazareth as the second person of the Trinity, but the Trinity is about a basic conviction: namely, God's love for the world and the world's response.<sup>47</sup> McFague states that Jesus is an affirmation, deepening and clarification of the Trinity, where the Trinity is a model; a way of speaking about God, an attempt to express God's profound involvement in, with, and for the world. Trinitarian talk is an attempt to express the full dimensions of the experience of God as the one in whom we live and move and have our being; the one from whom we come, to whom we return and in whose presence we live every minute.

### 6.3 God

First, McFague's Trinitarian picture of God is that of God as creator, sustainer and liberator, God as Christ the saviour, and God as the Spirit. Statements of doxological formulations are ways of speaking about a radical dependence on God for life, love and all the things we need to exist and to flourish.<sup>48</sup> Faith in the creator is not primarily about whether God produced matter from nothing; nor is it about the exact moment in time

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45 McFague 2001:15–16.

46 Ibid. 15.

47 Ibid. 143–144.

48 Ibid. 144.



when the universe appeared; rather, faith in God as creator refers to God's total graciousness in the gift of life and God's total commitment to created life. 'God as sustainer' refers to God's provision of the breath, food and necessities required for creation to survive. 'God as liberator' refers to God's protection from the 'evils' and dangers that threaten to enslave and undermine us.<sup>49</sup> McFague summarises faith in God as creator, liberator and sustainer as follows: 'The radically transcendent *and* radically immanent God is the source of everything that is, the power that frees creation from what would destroy it, and the love that nourishes it in every moment.'<sup>50</sup>

#### 6.4 Christology

Secondly, McFague develops two Christological models, namely, prophetic and sacramental Christologies. The prophetic model builds on the prophetic ministry and death of Jesus Christ, advancing love, care, concern, justice, rights, dignity and worth for all humans and all of creation. It proposes a cruciform lifestyle, expressed in a sharing and sacrificial love that challenges the selfishness and greed of consumerist lifestyles.<sup>51</sup> While prophetic Christology focuses on the human work of Christ, sacramental Christology emphasises Christ's divinity; thus, in Jesus, God is present among humans and in all creation. Hence, Jesus as the incarnate *Logos*, Wisdom, or Spirit of God is paradigmatic of God's broader incarnation in the whole universe. Appealing to Aquinas's claim that the whole panorama of nature is needed to reflect the divine glory, McFague argues that the whole of creation is a reflection of God incarnate; it is an image of God.<sup>52</sup> Specifically, the notion of the cosmic Christ accentuates the view that God is the God not only of human history, but also of nature. Thus, sacramental Christology does not reflect only the inclusivity of nature in the realm of God's redemption, it also stresses incarnation. Consequently, the physical dimension of life is vitally important, As McFague states:

*Incarnational Christology means that salvation is neither solely human nor spiritual; it must be for the entire creation, and it must address what makes different creatures and ecosystems flourish. Incarnational Christology says that God wants all of nature, human beings and all other entities to enjoy well-being in body and spirit. Incarnational Christology, then, expands the ministry and death of Jesus, the model for Christians of 'God with us', to envelop the entire universe.<sup>53</sup>*

49 Ibid. 145–146.

50 Ibid. 143 (original italics).

51 Ibid. 167–168.

52 Ibid. 169–170.

53 Ibid. 169–170.

According to McFague, a sacramental Christology is characterised not only by inclusion and embodiment, but also by hope; hope based in the resurrection of Christ.<sup>54</sup> The resurrection is the first day of the new creation that is preceded by diminishment, pain and death; it is emblematic of the power of God that is on the side of life and its fulfilment.

## 6.5 Spirit

Thirdly, McFague describes the Spirit as God at work in individuals, the church and human and natural society. The Spirit actualises atonement through salvation from personal sin, and life in the Spirit implies salvation from the communal, systemic, structural and institutional sin that prevents creation from flourishing.<sup>55</sup> The work of the Spirit in individuals implies the formation of people of virtue and character, like Dorothy Day and John Woolman, who serve as walking parables, cautionary tales and role models of cruciform and eventually flourishing life.<sup>56</sup> The Spirit inspires the church to live a counter-cultural life; that is, a sacrificial, cruciform lifestyle. The Spirit feeds the imagination of the church and enables participation in the task of re-envisioning in various publics; hence, according to McFague, the Spirit enables churches to participate in public opinion-formation and policy formulation processes, such that

*they should see themselves as advocates for such an alternative paradigm within the public discourse. The Christian churches (and all other religions as well) should be part of the conversation for the public good – not as cogs in the wheels of the establishment but as counter-cultural voices for an alternative kind of abundant life for all members of the global family.<sup>57</sup>*

McFague's pneumatology, in keeping with her Christology and doctrine of God, makes room for the universal and cosmic work of the Spirit.<sup>58</sup> The Spirit's work of renewal outside the church implies that Christianity participates with other religions in the public sphere, and that one of our most crucial contributions entails making people aware of the worldviews that underlie their social, economic and political choices. Christians are called upon to help people, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to see differently. Where people see differently, where they see the world as hidden in Christ and where they see with the lenses of cruciform and

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54 Ibid. 169–170.

55 Ibid. 185–186.

56 Ibid. 186–195.

57 Ibid. 199.

58 Ibid. 198–202.

sacrificial living, their hearts, minds and wills and eventually laws, policies and social practices are transformed; this renewal and transformation is worked out by the Spirit.

## 7. Concluding remarks

In considering what light a Trinitarian perspective sheds on addressing the tremendous challenges of (South) African societies in and through the three publics of theology, McFague's helpful analysis offers some, perhaps preliminary, answers; answers that ask for further reflection, deepening and amending.

That is, in the midst of our crises and challenges, African people can believe in a God who has created us for lives of dignity and flourishing; we are liberated by this God from all enslavements so that we never have to live as slaves again; we are nurtured by this God every day of our lives; in Jesus Christ this God shows solidarity with the oppressed and wronged and champions their cause; Jesus Christ includes all people and all of creation in the work of redemption; salvation is not only spiritual but it includes earthly, material, economic, political and cultural salvation; Christ's open grave is the basis of our hope and the assurance of our eventual victory and flourishing, and this is true despite the seemingly persistent presence of 'evil' in the world; while the Spirit transforms individuals, churches, human and natural societies to live with the vision of flourishing societies that flows from the self-giving, sacrificial love of God and God's people.

A Trinitarian approach to theology does offer a rationale to engage theologically with public life in an inclusive and faithful way that does justice to the God who created, liberates, sustains, saves and renews comprehensively and, by doing this, actualises abundant, flourishing life.



## ‘Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity’ or ‘The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity’?

Ernst M. Conradie and Teddy C. Sakupapa

### 1. Posing an intriguing question

This contribution emerges from a postgraduate course in theological hermeneutics that we offered at the University of the Western Cape in 2018. It was entitled ‘Theology and Decoloniality’. Together with six Honours students<sup>1</sup> we read some classic texts by Franz Fanon, Steven Bantu Biko, Kwame Bediako and Willie Jennings,<sup>2</sup> as well as various introductory texts on theological hermeneutics (for example, on translation, inculturation, localisation and contextualisation), postcolonialism and decoloniality. The students were required to write a research essay and we opted to set an example with an essay that focuses on the doctrine of the Trinity.

The question raised in the title of this contribution is an intriguing one. Does the doctrine of the Trinity remain trapped in the categories of Greek metaphysics that have been maintained in Western Christianity so that it is in need of thorough decolonising in Christian discourse in the contemporary African context? Or worse, is it an imperial construct that served hegemonic purposes in the Roman Empire and is still used to marginalise other religious traditions, following the pattern of the unholy alliance between Western missionaries and (neo-)colonial forces of occupation and exploitation? Or is faith in the Triune God itself born from a critique against Empire so that it tends to destabilise religious legitimations of colonial power? In short: Can the doctrine of the Trinity still be retrieved in the context of contemporary debates on postcolonialism and decoloniality?

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1 We wish to express our gratitude to Zolile Albany, Pervencia Farmer, Tsobotsi Koloti, Mkhangelisi Konza, Raymond Petersen and Zanele Sokatsha for digging deep into these texts with us.

2 See Bediako 1999; Biko 2017; Fanon 2017; Jennings 2010.

This question is addressed in several steps where each next section engages critically with the argument of the previous section. These steps are sketched here only in broad parameters in order to set an agenda for further research:

First, it is necessary to understand why there is an apparent lack of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in contemporary African Christian theology. This, we argue, is clearly related to the wish to maintain *continuity* between the identity of the God professed in Christianity and the Supreme Being of African Traditional Religion (ATR). This continuity was assumed in early Bible translations where personal names for 'God' were readily adopted from African languages. The obvious strategy, then, was to emphasise the continuity between the Supreme Being in ATR, Yahweh / Elohim in the Hebrew Bible, and God as Father in the New Testament. However, the African Christological reflections that followed these debates on continuity tended to underplay the Christian confession of Jesus Christ as 'truly divine' and of the Holy Spirit as One 'to be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son', as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 CE.

Understandably, this prompted the critique from outside Africa and from evangelicals inside Africa that African Christian theology is not sufficiently Trinitarian in orientation, perhaps because of a subordinant Christology. Some African theologians acknowledged this critique and responded by seeking to retrieve the doctrine of the Trinity or by adopting an African metaphysics to explain the Trinity in other than Greek categories.<sup>3</sup>

Second, in light of contemporary debates on decoloniality, African theologians also need to respond to the quite different critique by African philosophers such as Okot p'Bitek that Christian reinterpretations of the concept of God merely serve to ameliorate and legitimise the colonial marginalisation of African languages, cultures and religions. If so, the *discontinuity* between the God of Christianity and the Supreme Being as understood in ATR needs to be stressed for the sake of decolonial ways of thinking. The God of Christianity and therefore the doctrine of the Trinity have to be resisted since it operates in the service of colonisation. Accordingly, ecumenical efforts to impose a Trinitarian logic on African Christianity can only undermine religious diversity and the need for tolerance amidst religiously infused conflicts across the African continent.

Third, we reverse the critique by suggesting that the emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity in Western Christianity should not be taken for granted, despite the contemporary Trinitarian renaissance as if Western

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3 See Kombo 2007.

theology can set a Trinitarian standard for African theology. Following a famous essay by Arnold van Ruler, we raise the question whether a deeply Trinitarian theology may be found in Western Christianity –if a number of long-standing problems pertaining to the economic Trinity are not addressed.

Fourth, this critique of Trinitarian theology in Western theology is extended to Eastern Orthodox theology. It is clear that the Trinitarian renaissance in Western theology is inspired by ecumenical dialogue with Eastern Orthodox theologians. This typically leads to a short-cut to inner-Trinitarian speculation on the communion between Father, Son and Spirit in the immanent Trinity. Such speculation does not preserve the apophatic dimension of the Mystery and does not address the problems related to the economic Trinity either.

In two further sections we hint at a constructive way of addressing the question in the title of this contribution. Even if the Trinitarian confession may be superficially critiqued as an imperial compromise for the sake of preserving religious peace in the Roman Empire, the symbols of the Spirit, the cross and seeing God as Father (and not King or Emperor) are anti-imperialistic in origin. This decolonial impulse is strengthened, not weakened, when such symbols are combined.

We then argue that apophatic theology offers resistance against any tendency to take God for granted. The Jewish–Christian tradition is best regarded not as one which seeks to preserve God’s identity so that it remains uncontaminated by foreign influences. It remembers the past for the sake of projecting the future. Indeed, the triune God always seems to be moving ahead of God’s people, challenging them not to domesticate any concept of God, in order to create a different society, one that has never been before. Discontinuity in the understanding of God is deeply embedded in the tradition itself, while an emphasis on continuity may easily become sterile. A God of life, of history, of Exodus, of resurrection, of Pentecost, of mission and of transfiguration can never be taken for granted. This necessarily calls for an ongoing self-critique of all branches of Christian theology.

## 2. The Trinity as the inherent weakness of African Christian theology?

Given the universalising insistence of Western missionary theologies through Eurocentric metanarratives about God and the denigration of African Traditional Religion, African theologians such as John Mbiti and



Bolaji Idowu asserted the legitimacy of African traditional religions.<sup>4</sup> However, the contribution of such African theologians and church leaders to a new discourse on ATR was nothing more than a Christian theological reinterpretation – and appropriation – of the pre-Christian African past. An outcome of such endeavour was the portrayal of ATR as *preparatio evangelica*, a notion that was palpably articulated by the Kenyan theologian John Mbiti and most notably affirmed by Kwame Bediako, among others.

By arguing that Africans worshipped the God of creation [the Supreme Being] long before the arrival of Christian missionaries, first-generation African theologians, especially, asserted a universal notion of God. In his classic *Concepts of God in Africa*, Mbiti attempted to demonstrate that God as creator is ‘the commonest attribute of the works or activities of God’<sup>5</sup> among the African peoples whose concepts and names of God he compiled. Similarly, Bolaji Idowu attempted to show that African names for God were ‘not mere labels’, but rather were descriptive of God’s nature and most significantly of ‘the experience of Africans about [him], and their belief in [him]’. Thus, the need to stress continuity between the African understandings of God captured in the various African names of God and the God of Christian proclamation. Both Mbiti and Idowu affirmed that there is only one God, while acknowledging that the African concepts of God varied according to diverse peoples’ spiritual perception.<sup>6</sup> This notwithstanding, the description of ATR as polytheist by Western scholars who articulated the concept of God in Africa in terms of the high god, was rejected.<sup>7</sup> Instead, both Idowu and Mbiti emphasised a monotheistic continuity between African traditional religion and Christianity.<sup>8</sup> The degree of continuity was nevertheless articulated variously.<sup>9</sup> The Kenyan theologian Samuel Kibicho, for instance, posited a radical continuity and

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4 Sakupapa 2018b.

5 Mbiti 2013:91.

6 Idowu 1973:148.

7 Idowu further suggests that the monotheism of ATR (among the Yoruba in particular), may be best described in terms of diffused monotheism. See Idowu, 1973:136. However, other African scholars (e.g. Ogbonnaya) oppose both polytheism and monotheism as proper depictions of God in ATR but instead argue for an understanding of the divine in terms of divine communalism; that is, as communitheistic. See Ogbonnaya 1994:14–23.

8 Initial academic claims of such a theology of continuity were laid out in the respective works of missionary academics Smith 1950 and Parrinder 1954. Parrinder was in fact the first to introduce the African Traditional Religion as a separate category of study during his tenure at the University College Ibadan in Nigeria.

9 Sakupapa [note 537] 2018b.

further stressed that ATR possessed a saving knowledge of God in ATR.<sup>10</sup> The South African theologian Gabriel Setiloane endorsed Kibicho's view in his reflections on the Sotho-Tswana concept of God (Modimo), a view he portrayed as being superior to the western Christian notion.<sup>11</sup> If so, the Christianisation of the African concept of God was for Setiloane a diminution. For the Ghanaian theologian Kwesi Dickson, there is both continuity and discontinuity between Israel's and Africa's conceptions of God.<sup>12</sup> In Mbiti's work on African concepts of God, the continuity was expressed in his idea of Africa's pre-Christian religious heritage, namely ATR as *preparatio evangelica*. Such theological reinterpretation of Africa's pre-Christian religious heritage necessarily begged the question whether the Supreme Being of ATR has the same divine identity as the God of redemption proclaimed in Christian tradition.

Answering the question in the affirmative, African theologians were faced with the need to account for the new element that Christianity had introduced into the African religious experience, namely, Jesus Christ. This conviction is succinctly expressed in Mbiti's remark that the 'final test for the validity and usefulness of any theological contribution is Jesus Christ'.<sup>13</sup> For Mbiti, Christian theology ought properly to be Christology. These considerations suggested the inevitability of an African articulation of who Jesus Christ is. This soon became the burden of numerous Christological reflections that issued into, among others, the depiction of Christ as ancestor (Bediako; Bujo; Ezech; Nyamiti), Christus Victor (Mbiti), divine conqueror (Agyarko), elder brother (Kabesele, Sawyyer), guest (Udoh), great chief (Pobee), healer (Kolie, Shorter), king (Manus), liberator (Ela), master of initiation (Sanon), and revealer (Ezigbo). A cross-cutting assumption in many of these reflections is an affirmation of Christianity's central claims regarding the divinity and humanity of Jesus. However, the implications of such reflections for a Trinitarian doctrine of God received only tentative attention. The specific challenge that needed to be addressed in African Christological thought had to do with a proper account of Jesus Christ as being 'fully divine' in respect of the African spirit-world.<sup>14</sup>

Related to this concern is the insufficient attention paid in African theology to an understanding of the Holy Spirit as one of the divine 'persons'. Some African theologians have recently begun to explore this through

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10 Kibicho 1978:371.

11 See Setiloane 1979:63.

12 Dickson 1979:106.

13 Mbiti 1971:190.

14 See Pobee 1979.

a retrieval of some African notions such as ancestor<sup>15</sup> and vital force.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the burden of some of these contributions has been to articulate a pneumatology that reflects the place of the Spirit as member of the Trinity. Others, such as David Ngong, attempt a reconstructive articulation of an African pneumatology in light of the Pentecostalisation of Christianity in much of Africa by means of a critique of essentialising tendencies in the dominant forms of African theology.<sup>17</sup>

From the foregoing, it can be argued that, given the need to stress the continuity of God, African theologians have seldom noted divergences between the African and Christian notions of God. James Kombo captures this concern succinctly in his observation that the African views of God articulated by the early generation of African theologians were conceived within the confines of the African concepts of God as *Modimo*, *Nyasaye* or *Mulungu*, among others, and did not therefore presuppose an understanding of God in terms of the Trinity.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, African theological reflections on revelation buttressed the need for continuity. Idowu, for instance, who was one of the earliest African theologians to ponder the question whether the God known in ATR is the same God as the God of the whole universe, rejected any claim that God had revealed himself ultimately in a single religion. In this way, he inferred a universal possibility of revelation. Therefore, although the history of African theology is not short of reflections on revelation, such discourse did not go far enough to address the Trinity.<sup>19</sup> A crucial question in this regard is whether it is 'possible to have a revelation of God outside Jesus Christ or even the Judea-Christian tradition'.<sup>20</sup> Does the desire to affirm the continuity between the God of Christianity and the Supreme Being of African Traditional Religion undermine the ability to maintain a Trinitarian understanding of God? For African evangelical theologians, the views of the African theologians discussed above were interpreted as undermining the definitive revelation of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> They portrayed Christianity as radically discontinuous with ATR. Most African Evangelical theologians thus argued that ATR offered no or only distorted

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15 Sakupapa 2012.

16 Ngong 2010.

17 Kombo 2007:19.

18 See, for instance, papers presented at the Ibadan consultation organised by the All-Africa Conference of Churches in 1966, which were subsequently published as *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (1969).

19 Pobe 1979:67.

20 Turaki 2001:226.

21 This is variously addressed in the following publications: Kato 1975; Nyirong 1997; Adeyemo 1997; Adeyemo 1998; Turaki 1999:28.

revelation and salvation.<sup>22</sup> A classic example in this regard is the Nigerian evangelical theologian Byang Kato, who was concerned that ‘Biblical Christianity in Africa is being threatened by syncretism, universalism and christopaganism’.<sup>23</sup> In his critique of the African Christian theology advocated by the likes of Mbiti, Kato pleaded for a radical ‘uniqueness and finality’ of Jesus Christ. Another evangelical, Lenard Nyirongo, argued that there were radical differences between the Supreme Being of ATR and the God of the Bible.<sup>24</sup> Despite the efforts of African theologians to argue for continuity in understanding God’s identity, their largely unclear treatment of the Trinity revealed an inherent weakness of African theology, according to such evangelicals.

### 3. African resistance to the colonising doctrine of the Trinity

Alongside the evangelical critique of African theological discourse stressing the discontinuity in God’s identity for the sake of alleged doctrinal orthodoxy, there is the rather different critique of African Christian theology also stressing such discontinuity, but for the sake of decolonisation. This second critique is represented by non-Christian African scholars, most conspicuously the Ugandan poet and scholar Okot p’Bitek. He portrayed African Christian theologians as ‘intellectual smugglers’ who have Hellenised the African concepts of God.<sup>25</sup> In p’Bitek’s view, these African theologians sought to make the colonial religion palatable for the colonised through an emphasis on continuity. Quite blatantly, p’Bitek averred that African theologians had robed African deities with Hellenistic garb. Such a view, we argue, may well serve as a launch pad for an even more radical decolonial critique of Christianity as a colonising religion. Something of this concern is echoed in the nuanced critiques of Christianity by Steve Biko<sup>26</sup> and Frantz Fanon. In his *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon observed: ‘The church in the colonies is a white man’s Church, a foreigners’ Church. It does not call the colonised to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor.’<sup>27</sup> Unlike Fanon, who was generally ambivalent to religion, Biko’s critique included at the same time an invitation from black Christians to construct a black theology of liberation, understood

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22 Kato 1985:11.

23 Ibid.

24 This concern formed the gist of his argument in *The Gods of Africa or the God of the Bible*.

25 p’Bitek 2011:22.

26 Biko 2017:49, 64.

27 Fanon, 2017:69.

as ‘a situational interpretation of Christianity’.<sup>28</sup> In his discussion of the definition of black consciousness, Biko was perceptive of the ‘terrible role’ played by colonial education and religion in creating a ‘false understanding’ of the black self and of God.<sup>29</sup> Drawing on Biko’s hermeneutics of black consciousness and the experience of oppression, South African black theologians offered a critique and reconstruction of the racialised concept of God the Father and of Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup> While Biko’s challenge to theology may have been taken up by some South African black theologians, p’Bitek’s critique of Christianity – highlighted above – is yet to be thoroughly engaged by African theologians.<sup>31</sup> The force of p’Bitek’s critique notwithstanding, we argue that he himself did not escape the influence of the western academy in his reflections on ATR in general and on the divine in particular. Further, his critique that African theologians such as Mbiti were ‘more Christian than African’ essentialises African identity. Nevertheless, his critique is significant for a decolonial analysis of African Christian discourse on God.

If the African evangelical critique discussed in the previous section stands for radical discontinuity, the African theologians who argued for the continuity of God in ATR significantly contributed towards Africanising discourse on God, albeit in ways that retain the dominance of the western epistemological order.

How, then, may the African discourse on God be understood with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity?

A survey of African theological publications suggests that the Trinity remains one of the most problematic aspects of African theology.<sup>32</sup> A number of tendencies may be captured in this regard. Some African theologians such as Setiloane ignored the doctrine of the Trinity on the assumption that it is tailored in western and eastern metaphysical categories.<sup>33</sup> Others, such as Jesse Mugambi, argue that Christian teachings about God are not identical to African concepts. He contends that missionaries superimposed Christian teachings about God on traditional African concepts. Mugambi argues that the notion of ‘person’ in the Trinity is misleading and must be discarded.<sup>34</sup> Mugambi is here

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28 Biko 2017:64. See also Maluleke 2008:122.

29 Biko 2017:57.

30 Ntwasa & Moore 1973:20; Stubbs 2017:236–244.

31 See Bediako 1999: This concern is partly illustrated in Maluleke’s sub-title of an article on p’Bitek’s critique namely, ‘Re-opening a Debate that Never Started’.

32 Yahakangas 2002.

33 Setiloane 1979:64.

34 Mugambi 1989:75.

wrestling with the problem regarding the relationship between language and thought. As the Ghanaian philosopher Kwesi Wiredu cautions, taking 'cross-cultural equivalences' to western concepts of God and person for granted may lead to conceptual superimposition.<sup>35</sup> In light of such considerations, some African philosophers argue that the identification of the Supreme Being in ATR with the Christian God may be seen as an instance of conceptual superimposition. Wiredu thus suggests a number of concepts that cry for conceptual decolonisation, some of which are crucial in the African discourse on God (for example, person, Spirit and substance, to name a few). These views notwithstanding, a few monographs and articles by a number of African theologians devote specific attention to the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>36</sup> In what follows, we offer a discussion of the salient aspects of the recent African discourse on the Trinity. The earliest of these was Charles Nyamiti, who believes that the Supreme Being of ATR is the same God who reveals himself in the Bible. He argues that the difference between the African concept and the Christian one is Christocentric. As such, he proceeds by attributing the title 'ancestor' to Christ, based on an understanding of the mediatory role of Christ between God and humanity. By utilising the notion of ancestor analogically, Nyamiti develops a doctrine of the Trinity based on ancestrology and accordingly argues that there are ancestral relations in the Trinity.<sup>37</sup> Although such an ancestral Christology is widely adopted, the question remains whether this does not lead to subordinism that can only undermine a fully Trinitarian notion of God in African theology.<sup>38</sup> Other contributions such as Kombo's *The Doctrine of God* employ an African metaphysics of being (*ntu*) to reinterpret the Trinity. Kombo's conceptual framework is based on Bantu notions of being previously articulated by the Rwandese priest Alexis Kagame who developed a theory of Bantu categories of being derived from Kinyarwanda. The Nigerian Jesuit priest and theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator appropriates an African maternal symbol *Obirin meta*, which is derived from the Yoruba language and literary means 'a woman with many sides, a many-sided character'.<sup>39</sup> Orobator suggests that this symbol offers a pragmatic and gender-sensitive approach to understanding how the Triune God relates with us. However, he does not unpack how the symbol of *Obirin meta* explains divinity.

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35 Wiredu 1998:23.

36 These include Bitrus 2017; Kombo 2007; Nyamiti 1996; Ogonnaya 1994.

37 Nyamiti 1996:46.

38 For such a critique of ancestral Christology, see Chapter 4 of Robert Agyarko's thesis 2010:69–100.

39 Orobator 2008:31.

In his contribution to the Trinitarian discourse in African theology, Nigerian theologian Okechukwu Ogbonnaya attempts a revision of the tendency to dismiss peculiar African influences on the North African theologian Tertullian.<sup>40</sup> Describing Tertullian's theology of the Trinity as divine community, Ogbonnaya posits a link between community and Trinity: 'Communality is the essence of the gods'.<sup>41</sup> He contends that the concept of divine communality is both logical and necessary for the African context, given the communal and relational orientation of African communities. This leads him to a nuanced critique of dominant concepts of the monotheistic nature of the Supreme Being in ATR, arguing that the 'One in African thought should be understood in terms of communal oneness'.<sup>42</sup> It is, however, unclear how Ogbonnaya construes the African community of gods as identical with the Trinitarian communion.

Other African theologians have appropriated the reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly following the so-called social analogy in the Eastern tradition.<sup>43</sup> Such approaches employ the language of the Trinity as a sociopolitical critique. Nigerian theologian Ibrahim Bitrus is pioneering an approach to the Trinity in African theology that projects the Trinity as a model for community. He argues that thus understood, the Trinitarian communion of God is a critique to patriarchal domination inherent in African communalism as well as ethnic and religious exclusivism.<sup>44</sup> Bitrus attempts to recast the African tradition of community on the basis of a particular understanding of Trinitarian communion. He thus argues 'an authentic African tradition of community is that which lives out the just, egalitarian, and inclusive life of the Triune God'.<sup>45</sup> However, the tendency in social doctrines of the Trinity to model societies on the Trinity has limitations, as we will argue below.

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40 In his English translation of Tertullian's *Adversus Praxean Liber*, Ernst Evans, for example, uses the appellation African in reference to Tertullian yet states that 'designation Africa is applied in its ancient sense, denoting the provinces now called Tunisia, Tripolitania, Algeria, and Morocco, but excluding Egypt and Libya which in language and in general interest were more closely related to the Levant than to the West'. See Evans 2011:1.

41 Ogbonnaya 1994:201.

42 Ogbonnaya 1994:25.

43 See, for example, Oduyoye 1986:141–144.

44 See, for example, Oduyoye 1986:141–144.

45 Bitrus 2017:169–182.



4. The Trinity as an inherent weakness in Western Christian theologies?

The previous sections noted ecumenical concerns over the commitment of African Christian theologies to a fully Trinitarian confession, given the commitment to a sense of continuity between the Supreme Being of African Traditional Religion and a Christian understanding of God. Given the 20th century renaissance of Trinitarian theology (following the earlier work of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner), this may create the impression that western theology is able to set Trinitarian standards that may be employed to assess the orthodoxy of African theology. Is this not a colonising strategy that would reinforce the dependence of theological education in Africa on tertiary institutions aligned to colonial powers?

We suggest that the confidence that western theology is able to do justice to the Trinitarian heart of the Christian faith may well be misplaced. The underlying problem here is the failure to attend to problems related to the so-called economic Trinity by taking a theological short-cut to an emphasis on relationships within the immanent Trinity.

In a famous essay on 'The Necessity of a Trinitarian Theology', Arnold van Ruler observes that '[s]imply recognizing the necessity of a trinitarian theology does not mean that one succeeds in the project'.<sup>46</sup> He adds that he has not found such a theology in the entire Christian theological tradition, while suggesting that Calvin approached that ideal most closely, and admits that he is not able to offer anything approximating that either. This comment may sound odd, given the renaissance of Trinitarian theology in the last century and the astonishing flourishing of books on the doctrine of the Trinity over the last three decades. Yet, a 'fully Trinitarian' theology remains more elusive than a mere affirmation of its significance may suggest.

In an earlier contribution, Ernst Conradie identified three core problems related to the economic Trinity that have to be addressed before claims for a 'fully' Trinitarian theology can be sustained.<sup>47</sup> First, there is the need to do justice to both God's work of creation and salvation (the first and the second articles of the Christian creed). This problem is acutely formulated by Mercy Amba Oduyoye: 'Is the God of our redemption the same God of our creation?'<sup>48</sup> While eschatology is the key

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<sup>46</sup> See Van Ruler 1989.

<sup>47</sup> Conradie 2013a.

<sup>48</sup> Oduyoye, 1986:75.

to maintain an adequate interplay, this remains elusive, to say the least.<sup>49</sup> Second, world Christianity remains deeply divided over the relationship between the work of Christ and the relative independence of the work of the Spirit. So-called mainline churches typically insist that the work of the Spirit is closely tied to (and indeed proceeds from) the work of Christ, while many others resist that idea, in order not to ‘control the Spirit’.<sup>50</sup> Third, the relationship between the work of the Father and the work of the Spirit also calls for clarification, especially in the context of multi-faith dialogue. Yes, the Spirit is confessed to proceed from the Father, but with what instructions? Is the Spirit present among other religious tradition, long before the message about Christ arrived, or not?

Each of these theological questions remains far from resolved in contemporary Christian theology – and not only in the West. The need to address such questions remains crucial for African theologians, too. We argue that to suggest that western Christianity is able to do justice to the Trinitarian confession merely on the basis of the Trinitarian renaissance is misguided.

## 5. The Trinity as an inherent weakness in Eastern Christian theologies?

The distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity is usually traced back to St Irenaeus of Lyons – who probably came from Smyrna in Asia Minor, but lived and taught at Lugdunum (now Lyons) and thus holds together the Eastern and Western traditions of Christianity. This distinction remains as necessary now as it was then, mainly to resist modalistic views of God. According to modalism, one may assume an underlying monotheism, albeit that this one God is revealed in different ways at different times so that God has ‘many names’. In response, Christian orthodoxy has rightly insisted that there can be no tension between who God is and whom God is revealed to be.<sup>51</sup> In short, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is fully authentic. If God is revealed to us as ‘Father’, ‘Son’ and ‘Spirit’, then this is who God truly is, from ‘all eternity’ (that is, the immanent Trinity).

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49 See the following contributions that seek to fathom the depths of this disastrous inability to do justice to both God’s work of creation and of salvation: Conradie 2011; Conradie 2012; Conradie 2013b; Conradie 2015.

50 For reflections on the contemporary ecumenical significance of the *filioque* controversy, see Conradie 2013c.

51 One reference may suffice here, namely to the textbook developed by our former UWC colleague Jaap Durand 2007.

At the same time, apophatic theology has rightly insisted that God's selfdisclosure does not imply 'full disclosure'.<sup>52</sup> We can at best be witnesses to what has been revealed to us and are not called to be the judge in the context of multi-faith conversations. This implies that our knowledge of God as Triune has to be based on how God has been revealed in history, in the economy of salvation (that is, the economic Trinity). In 20th century Western theology, this recognition is best understood with reference to 'Rahner's rule', stating that discourse on the immanent Trinity has to be based on the economic Trinity.

Arguably, the history of Christian theology (in the East and the West, the North and the South) may be sketched in terms of failed attempts to hold onto this dual insight. Learned theologians all too hastily rush in where proverbial angels fear to tread by penetrating into the inner-Trinitarian mystery, for example, by reflecting on the perichoretic relationships between the three divine persons. This constitutes a theological short-cut that fails to be disciplined by the longer route of coming to terms with the economic Trinity. If this applies to contemporary African theologies, it may well apply to Western theologies and, indeed, to Eastern theologies as well.

It is not possible to argue the case with detailed references here as the literature is overwhelming. One generalisation may suffice. The recent renaissance of Trinitarian theology in the global North is prompted partly<sup>53</sup> by ecumenical dialogue between eastern theologians such as John Zizioulas and Dumitru Staniloae and western-trained theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Colin Gunton, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine La Cugna, Jürgen Moltmann and Robert Jenson, to mention only a few influential figures. The main thrust of this dialogue may be understood in terms of a retrieval of the so-called 'social analogy' for understanding the Trinity as a perichoretic communion of three persons, instead of the 'psychological analogy' adopted within western Christianity, as influenced by Augustine of Hippo. The social analogy suggests a relational ontology where being is understood as communion.<sup>54</sup> The argument is that relationships have an ontological priority over individuals that are related with each other and

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52 For an interpretation of Trinity as apophatic speech see Kilby 2010.

53 In oral feedback on the original paper, Robert Vosloo reminded us of especially three factors that prompted the renaissance of Trinitarian theology in the West, namely the crisis in (mono)theism following theological reflections on 'the death of God', ecumenical conversations between East and West in the context of the Cold War, and the need to name God in a pluralist post-Christian context, also in conversation with Judaism and Islam.

54 See the influential study by Zizioulas 1985:86–89.

that this emphasis is epitomised by the notion of the Triune communion. There can be little doubt that this approach is highly attractive, also in the African context, wherever the significance of 'ubuntu' is recognised.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, we remain unconvinced that such a theological short-cut to the immanent Trinity has resolved the problems pertaining to the economic Trinity, as outlined above. In fact, the temptation to engage in inner-Trinitarian mysticism offers a facile excuse to neglect such problems.

Moreover, the danger is that the argument becomes circular in the sense that the social implications derived from such an emphasis on communion<sup>56</sup> are read into an understanding of communion without due cognisance of hierarchical relationships in terms of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation and being able bodied.<sup>57</sup> Even where the full divinity of 'Father', 'Son' and 'Spirit' is confessed, there is some ordering: The Son is 'eternally begotten' from the Father (and not vice-versa), while the Spirit 'proceeds' from the Father (and not vice-versa), while procession 'also from the Son' is disputed in a critique of hierarchical thinking. Should such traditional orderings be avoided for the sake of egalitarian notions of communion? Contemporary theological debates on the gendered nature of naming the three persons suffice to indicate that such issues are far from resolved, not only, but certainly also, in Eastern theologies. Again, theological short-cuts to the immanent Trinity cannot resolve such problems.

## 6. The decolonial impulse in the Trinitarian confession

The second and third sections above discussed the critique of African Christian theology as being either not Trinitarian enough, on the one hand, or being in service of a colonising agenda, on the other. The fourth and fifth sections extended this twofold critique to western and eastern theologies with a *tu quoque* argument. The question then remains whether Trinitarian theology (in Africa or elsewhere in the world) is inextricably tied to a colonial agenda. In this and the next sections we address this question constructively.

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55 See Sakupapa [note 537] 2018a.

56 See, especially, Boff 1988.

57 This challenge may also be framed in terms of a projection of an idealised form of community onto the divine. This is echoed in the famous phrase 'The Trinity is our social program'. For a critique of social Trinitarianism as projection, see Kilby 2000; see also Torrance 1995:249.

From within the contemporary African context and given discourse on postcolonialism and decoloniality, it has become rather facile to critique the doctrine of the Trinity as a hegemonic notion that serves a colonising agenda. Such a critique has been reiterated in the literature. Accordingly, the Council of Nicaea served the purpose of unity in the Roman Empire. The Trinity is an ecclesial compromise that seeks to preserve continuity between the Jewish heritage and Christian commitments under Roman rule. For some thinkers, such as Von Harnack, the doctrine of the Trinity as expressed in the Nicene Creed is interpreted as dogma. Defining dogma 'as the work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel', Harnack portrays the doctrine of the Trinity as an outcome of the 'Hellenisation of the gospel'.<sup>58</sup> Throughout the history of the Atlantic slavery and colonialism, the doctrine of the Trinity has been readily employed to legitimise colonial rule and to suppress indigenous spirituality. Particularist views on the Trinity can only undermine multi-faith dialogue; monotheism allows more room for dialogue with Judaism, Islam and ATR,<sup>59</sup> while the liberal assumption is that it is secularism that creates such common ground.

It is impossible to address such a critique here in any detail. That a different reading of such history is possible is suggested by the counter-hegemonic connotations attached to the three core symbols of spirit, cross and father. In short, wherever 'spirit' is invoked, this can more readily be employed to call for social transformation than to legitimise the status quo. If the 'created order' underlies the social order, then creation through the Spirit cannot be domesticated and allows for an evolving (social) order. The cross is of course an imperial symbol of brutal oppression but the way that this has been adopted by Christian communities persecuted by Roman authorities epitomises resistance against imperial forces. To suggest that God is best known as 'our father' is to domesticate an understanding of God in every locality and to resist homogenising forces where God is portrayed as King or Emperor.

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58 Von Harnack 1961:17. We argue that the relation between Christianity and the culture of Greco-Roman antiquity need not be understood as one way traffic in either direction. For scholars like Tillich, a limitation of Von Hamack's view may have to do with his misrepresentation of classical Greek and of Hellenistic thought as 'intellectualistic'. See Tillich 1963:287. For a critique of Von Hamack 's view, see Heileman 1994.

59 For useful contributions to the debates on multi-faith dialogue and global concepts of God, see Hintersteiner 2007 and Jeanrond & Lande 2005.

It is evidently possible to colonise these very symbols in order to legitimise a patriarchal ecclesiastics, to militarise crusaders for Christ and to entrench the dominant spirit of capitalism. However, given the contexts within which they emerged, these symbols retain the potential to disrupt such attempts to control their power. For African theologians, it remains a question whether such symbols remain viable to convey an understanding of the God of life.

#### 7. Apophatic resistance to any tendency to take God for granted

The rhetoric of ‘decolonising the doctrine of the Trinity’ may well provoke a misconstrued polemic. The one side of the polemic (calling for decolonial theology) seems to assume a cultural and religious identity lying in a pristine precolonial past that has been disrupted by colonialism and that prompts the need in contemporary African theology to ensure a persuasive continuity between the God traditionally known as Creator and the Saviour proclaimed and confessed within African Christianity. More significantly, it seeks a different epistemology from the dominant ones of western theology. The other side of the polemic (presumably resisting decolonial theology) seems to assume a stable doctrinal identity in ecumenical Christianity derived from the Christian creeds that has to be safeguarded against heretical distortions wherever Christianity becomes rooted throughout the ‘whole inhabited world’.

The need for continuity is thus emphasised on both sides of the polemic. God’s identity is known from the past and this has to be protected amidst contemporary challenges. The way in which such a polemic is construed does not reckon with apophatic resistance against any tendency to take God’s identity for granted. Arguably, this is one of the core characteristics of the engagement with God’s identity and character throughout the Jewish-Christian tradition. The identity of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and Sarah/Hagar, Rebecca and Leah/Rachel) does not lie in the ancestral past, but in a destabilising journey towards a promised future. Every time that God’s identity and character is taken for granted, prophets have helped their people to discern where this God is heading towards. This is especially evident from six major transitions described in the biblical roots of Christianity – from Ur of the Chaldees to the wandering God of Abraham, from the Israelite slaves in Egypt to the God of the exodus, from the fertility cults in Canaan to trust in Yahweh alone, from the royal God of David to the suffering servant in Isaiah, from loyalty to God’s law amongst the *hasidim* to God’s solidarity with the marginalised in the ministry of Jesus, and from the God of

Israel to the inclusion of gentiles in God's household as epitomised by the apostle Paul's ministry. In each case, there is some continuity with a more traditional understanding of God, but the emphasis is on a surprisingly novel understanding of God's identity and character.

In the subsequent history of Christianity, one may detect a similar tendency to disrupt past assumptions about God's identity and character. It seems that in many cases, the new recipients of the gospel have understood the message better than the messengers themselves. A few examples may suffice to illustrate the ironies of history: Gentiles have understood the message better than those insisting on Jewish cultural identity. Black slaves have welcomed the inclusive message that white slave owners have resisted. The colonised have embraced the decolonising message that colonisers carried with them. Untouchable Dalits have been touched by the message that neither imperial landlords nor the higher castes would be willing to touch. One may readily extrapolate this tendency towards the inclusion of the LGBTQIA, other animals and (who knows?) extra-terrestrial forms of life in God's household. This pattern allows for the vehement critique of religion, including civil religion and religious oppression, that is so typical of prophetic theology. This is a destabilising force that threatens any form of traditionalism, whether Eastern, Western or African in location.

Put cryptically, the doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates this decolonising movement wherever it is not too readily stabilised as doctrine. This is possible only where Rahner's rule is adhered to, where theological short-cuts to the immanent Trinity are resisted, where the focus remains on the economic Trinity, where past narratives of God decolonising engagements in history are retold for the sake of a promised future, an emerging social order that has never been, a new world that is promised and envisaged.

The key here is perhaps the arcane discipline of the liturgy through which the people of God slowly learn to see the dominant powers of the world through God's eyes – as colonising powers that cannot and will not withstand the test of mercy and therefore of justice. They may learn to see the world in the light of the Light of the world. They may begin to see that it is actually not money, the spirit of capitalism, that makes the world go round, but a more hidden, sanctifying Spirit.<sup>60</sup> At best, the confession of God as Triune serves as the doxological conclusion of the liturgy.

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60 See Conradie 2012d.





## The (Non-)Translatability of the Trinity

Retief Müller

### 1. Introduction: Christianity's vulnerable monotheism

Lamin Sanneh, the recently deceased Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, was among other things well known for a highly influential publication on the so-called process of vernacularisation, which results from and coincides with scriptural translation in the missionary-indigenous encounter in Christian history. The book in question, *Translating the Message: the missionary impact on culture*, soon became the foundational document in what would, in the budding academic field of World Christianity, become known as the translatability thesis. The other prominent name associated with the translatability thesis is the Scottish historian of Christianity, Andrew F. Walls, according to whom the Christian gospel is 'infinitely translatable' (Walls 2002:29). Sanneh uses similar vocabulary to emphasise the centrality of translation in Christianity, which, while strengthening the religion's ability to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries, also makes it somewhat vulnerable. According to Sanneh, Christianity made

*translation the original medium of its Scripture. And translation opened Christianity to secular influences as well as to the risk of polytheism – Christians adopted as their own the names of God of other people. ... Once an entire culture opened itself to the Christian presence it was possible for the missionary to influence and mold that culture without fear of total rejection, though that did not resolve the problem of syncretism (Sanneh 2009:43).*

With this last comment, Sanneh points to one of the more serious concerns for Christians fearing the contamination of the unadulterated gospel. This is no idle or indeed new concern. In fact, the spectre of heresy, which is a close cousin of syncretism, has haunted Christian self-understanding as well as Christians' understanding of the confessional and/or cultural other in Christ from early on in the story. However, syncretism, which mainly

refers to mixing of some sort, does not have to be interpreted negatively. More sympathetically, it serves to describe the creativity of a multitude of worldwide Christian responses to the message of the gospel. Such creativity and multiplicity are the inevitable consequences of translation. Yet, the more serious question for this article, as for Christians from the early church until today, is whether Christianity's translatability perhaps inevitably works against and undermines its own monotheistic assertions? This article will not attempt to fully answer this question, but it will show that translation and translatability complicated in various ways Christian understanding of the oneness of God. Christian monotheism is indeed a vulnerable monotheism.

## 2. Translatability versus non-translatability in religious history

An important if controversial aspect in *Translating the Message* concerns the way in which Sanneh compares and contrasts Christian and Muslim positions on translatability and analyses the supposed consequences for the two religions and their adherents. Sanneh distinguishes in the book between early Christian views on monotheism over and against Judaism and Islam:

*For one thing, Judaism remained predominantly the religion of the people called Jews for whom conversion was both a religious step and incorporation into a racial community. For another, although Islam made submission to one God the towering call of its mission, it placed this alongside the revelation of the Arabic Qur'an, so that when the 'sword of truth' was unsheathed against polytheists and unbelievers, its double blade gleamed with the point of God's oneness and the infallibility of the Arabic revelation. It was always difficult to judge which blade cut deeper, the conviction of the one God or the power of the Arabic Scripture (Sanneh 2009:42).*

Hence, Sanneh argues that 'Arabization' and 'Islamization' went hand in hand in Muslim history. According to this view, Islam is fundamentally untranslatable. Arabic is sacrosanct and Muslim scripture can at best be interpreted only to non-Arabic speakers, but such a rendition is not the real revelation, which is the Arabic Qur'an. The contrast with Christianity could not be any greater, as also explained by Walls:

*The divine Word is the Qur'an, fixed in heaven forever in Arabic, the language of original revelation. For Christians, however, the divine Word is translatable, infinitely translatable. The very words of Christ himself*

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*were transmitted in translated form in the earliest documents we have, a fact surely inseparable from the conviction that in Christ, God's own self was translated into human form. Much misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims has arisen from the assumption that the Qur'an is for Muslims what the Bible is for Christians. It would be truer to say that the Qur'an is for Muslims what Christ is for Christians (Walls 2002:29).*

I shall focus on the theme of translatability in Christianity with the background question in mind of whether Christianity is fundamentally constituted by its original message, the Word in other words, or whether the most central doctrines should also be part of the equation. For now, it would be important to note that Christian translatability, according to these abovementioned authors, has everything to do with the peculiarity or rather particularity of the Christian understanding of God.

### 3. The Trinity as a problematic concept in history

The Trinity is, of course, the way in which Christians express their peculiar understanding of the Oneness of God. It may seem like a compromised form of Oneness, even a contradiction in terms. Three is, of course, not equal to one, as any grade two mathematics learner would be able to point out. Christian insistence on the oneness of the Trinity has not, by and large, been able to convince Muslims of Christianity's adherence to monotheism. Quite the contrary. To quote from an English interpretation of the Quran: 'Indeed, the truth deny they who say: "Behold, God is the Christ, son of Mary" ... Behold, anyone who ascribes divinity to any being beside God, unto him will God deny paradise, and his goal shall be the fire ... Indeed, the truth they deny who say: "Behold, God is the third of a trinity" – seeing that there is no deity whatever save the One God ... The Christ, son of Mary, was but a messenger' (Surah 5.72–75).

Yet, for biblical and historical reasons, which I cannot elaborate on much here, Christians really have no other option than to express their/our belief in the Oneness of God through the apparently paradoxical Trinity. It is a mystery, as great theologians such as Gregory of Nazianzus and John Calvin, among many others, have believed (see Mathison 2018).

Before proceeding, and possibly at risk of belabouring an obvious point to a learned readership, it seems nonetheless necessary to mention a few points about the pre-history of the doctrine of the Trinity. Church historian Franz Dünzl explains that what we refer to as monotheism was described as 'monarchy' (*monarchia*) by early Christians. 'They spoke emphatically of the "sole rule of the one God", of the divine monarchy' (Dünzl 2007:25). The divine monarchy was, of course, a preservation

of Jewish monotheism, 'except that the God of the Old Testament has appeared as a human being in Jesus Christ, he has suffered as a human being and has redeemed us ... It is quite imaginable that in the second century, at least in Asia Minor, such modalism was common church teaching' (Dünzl 2007:28).

This view, however, became progressively challenged by the so-called Logos theologians who had deeply imbibed Greek philosophy and resided in ancient variants of our contemporary multicultural cities. These were places such as Alexandria, Rome and Carthage, where Logos theologians identified the Christ with the eternal Logos. These included learned scholars such as Origen, but especially Tertullian, who more than anyone would be responsible for early formulations of the Trinity.

The Trinity was formulated as a concept that countered modalism, but which still maintained an underlying monotheistic principle. 'Thus according to Tertullian there is only one God, only one divine state of being or status, only one divine substance and one divine power. But in salvation history, in creation and redemption different gradations, forms and specific expressions of the deity can be distinguished, namely the Son and Spirit alongside the Father' (Dünzl 2007:32).

Tertullian, it should be added, was a Latin-speaking theologian of the West. In the East, the most important Logos theologian when it came to formulating the Trinity was Origen. Origen emphasised the point that there was only one God, yet in his Trinitarian conceptions, he emphasised distinctiveness over unity. Here, the Greek terms (*ousia*) (divine substance) and (*hypostasis*), 'derived from the verb *hyphistamai*, "be present, exist"' (Dünzl 2007:35), become important, and ultimately controversial. According to Dünzl, *ousia* and *hypostasis* were still interchangeable, and therefore Origen used both to point to the distinctiveness within the Trinity. On the other hand, in Origen's understanding, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were unified through 'harmony (*symplosia*) and identity of willing', as well as through an under-conceptualised 'essential goodness', which distinguishes them from all other existing beings (Dünzl 2007:35–36; cf. Phan 2011:8–9).

It seems that the unity aspect of Origen's trinitarianism was somewhat vague then, and he was subsequently criticised in church history for not being clear enough about that. However, the most serious challenge to trinitarianism emerged when Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria who was originally from Libya, proposed a way of reconciling Christology with monotheism. This he did around 318 CE, by arguing through his exegesis of Proverbs 8:22–25 that the Logos did, in fact, have a beginning, in contradistinction to God, who has no beginning.

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Arius inferred from the text that the Son of God, the Logos, had a *beginning* – certainly before the earth, the depths, the springs, before the mountains and hills and even before the time of the world (*aion*); but he did have a beginning, and for this beginning of the Logos scripture uses not only the metaphor ‘begetting’ (which is common in the church) but also the term ‘creation’ (Dünzl 2007:43).

The point about creation, which made it possible to talk about the Logos as a creature, and therefore in no way a threat to the oneness of God, was, of course, extremely controversial. In spite of having some powerful Bishops as allies, Arius was eventually excommunicated, although he was later pardoned (see MacCulloch 2010:215–216).

However, the Arian idea was not put to rest that easily and the question of exactly how the Logos, as identified with the Son in Christian Theology, relates to the Father, continued to divide the church. The dispute was eventually brought to a head by the emperor Constantine, who, interestingly perhaps from a Roman conception of religion, where unity of faith was everything, became alarmed at the evident disunity among followers of the religion he had adopted and identified as a most suitable cohesive factor in his empire. Hence, he called into being the Council of Nicaea, likely not out of any theological concern for ultimate truth regarding the Christian conception of God, but rather to ensure an end to disunity among the churches in the empire. ‘His perspective was that of a Roman emperor who wanted to promote the unity of religion in order to ensure for himself the protection of the supreme deity. His intervention in the dispute over Arius was no exception here’ (Dünzl 2007:50).

The Nicæan creed achieved Constantine’s goal of preserving unity, and it even went some way towards creating a common understanding of the Trinity, but, partly as a result of divergent linguistic interpretations between East and West, some misunderstanding and contrary views continued to divide opinion for many years to come, as I shall shortly elaborate.

However, before moving on to the complexities involving translation and translatability, some words are needed on the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity, particularly since the Spirit is such an important feature of Pentecostal religiosity, which increasingly takes centre stage in contemporary world Christianity. It is perhaps significant that although the Spirit has always been part of Christian conceptions of God, none of the controversy surrounding the relationship between Father and Son characterised the role of the Spirit. Dünzl explains:

*The fact that the equivalent for 'spirit' in Greek is neuter (to pneuma) and thus evokes more the idea of a gift than that of a subject, and that talk of the Pneuma – unlike talk of the Son of God – did not immediately and automatically pose a question to monotheism must also have played a role in bracketing off the Spirit from the discussion. Moreover Judaism had already been able to speak quite unproblematically of the spirit (ruah) of God without seeing the unity of Yahweh being affected (Dünzl 2007:117).*

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit, as part of the Trinity, was also not at all a problem-free designation, and indeed, in post-Nicene times, there were the so-called Pneumatomachi ('fighters against the Spirit'). The Neo-Nicene author Basil of Caesarea wrote his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* specifically to persuade these 'fighters' of the Spirit's place in the Trinity. 'Basil emphasizes the equality of rank within the Trinity, as it is clearly expressed in the command of the risen Christ to baptize in the name of the Father *and* of the Son *and* of the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 28.19, *Holy Spirit* 10.24–26). Unlike the Eastern subordinationists, Basil thus sees Matt. 28.19 as documenting, not a gradated order of ranks, but the equality of Father, Son and Spirit' (Dünzl 2007:121).

It is noteworthy that the 381 Council of Constantinople, which at least for a time united Eastern and Western understandings of the Trinity until the *filioque* controversy would rear its head, largely followed Basil of Caesarea's doctrine of the Spirit. I do not have the space here to elaborate on the *filioque* controversy, except to state that it involved a seemingly minor point of disagreement regarding the question of the Spirit's procession from the Father, as was the original Nicene formulation, versus the Latin church's increasingly frequent use of *filioque*, which is a clause that adds 'and the Son' to the doctrine regarding the Spirit's procession. In other words, in the Western church, the Spirit was confessed to have proceeded from both the Father and the Son. This apparent change to a dearly held ecumenical creed was problematic for the churches of the East. This ultimately unresolved disagreement between East and West was partially responsible for the 11th century schism between the Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) churches (see MacCulloch 2010:310ff.).

#### 4. Translatability and the doctrine of the Trinity

With the above, I have presented a glimpse into how different interpretations of key terms used to describe the Trinity have led to tension, controversy and back-and-forth accusations of heresy. Given the complexity of the doctrine, especially the fine line its formulators had



to tread between holding fast to monotheism, and an understanding of divinity that allows for their confession of Jesus of Nazareth as Lord to be included in such a monotheism, it is not surprising that tensions and sometimes contrary interpretations arose. What furthermore becomes apparent is that Greek and Latin renditions of key concepts did not convey exactly similar semantics in the different contexts. Referring to the Council of Nicaea, which began its deliberations in June 325, Dünzl maintains that it is not an insignificant matter that the language in which deliberations were held, as well as the theological disputations surrounding Arius, was Greek.

*For in the years and decades after Nicaea it was to prove that the church in the West, which had been using Latin as a theological language for just under a century, could not always follow the finer details of the Greek discussion, with the result that because of the difference in language people sometimes missed the point (Dünzl 2007:52).*

Because, although the Arian heresy had been conclusively dealt with, the question over whether the Trinity designated three distinct entities or only one continued to reside in a grey area of divergent interpretation, as briefly indicated above. Language had much to do with this. In reference to Origen, above, I have mentioned the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*. For Origen, it was important to emphasise that each of the Trinity had its own *hypostasis*, or way of existing. Yet Dünzl points out the problem created by translation:

The Latin equivalent of the Greek term *hypostasis* was *substantia*. The two words correspond to some degree etymologically (*hypo-stasis* – *sub-stantia*), so intrinsically the translation is not wrong. But the content changes with the translation into Latin: if Eastern theology spoke of two hypostases, in Latin that amounted to a difference in substance between Father and Son. Accordingly, around 210 the first Latin trinitarian theologian, Tertullian of Carthage, had coined the slogan *una substantia* (Dünzl 2007:72).

The tendency to treat ‘hypostasis’ and ‘substantia’ as interchangeable led to much misunderstanding and mutual suspicion of heresy between East and West in the years following Nicaea. It is only with the rise of the so-called Cappadocian fathers that this divide was crossed, to a large degree thanks to the pioneering work of especially the oldest among the Cappadocians, Basil the Great, who was Bishop of Caesarea in around 369/370. Gradually Basil came to realise that ‘substance’ and ‘hypostasis’

had to be separated for the sake of the Trinity. In Basil's solution, which more narrowly defines the meaning of these terms, "substance" relates to what is common to Father and Son, what is *general*, whereas the term "hypostasis" denotes what is *particular* to Father and Son, i.e. what makes the Father *the Father* and the Son *the Son* ... Thus in principle the Neo-Nicene solution was found. There is only *one* incomprehensible divine substance which is realized in different ways in the *three* hypostases of the Godhead ...' (Dünzl 2007:107).

In spite of this near miraculous agreement reached on interpreting the Trinity, it should be emphasised that it had come through an amount of linguistic manipulation. 'Substance' could mean one thing, and one thing only. 'Hypostasis' could mean another thing, but that other thing only. If everyone abided by these narrowly defined linguistic boundaries then the Trinity could be understood. That is well and good, but it raises the question regarding the translatability of terms that had to be so closely circumscribed in the first place. Surely, any attempt at translation would be entering a minefield. It would be near impossible to stay clear of some of the problems that characterised the initial misunderstandings between Greek and Latin terms, not to mention any additional misunderstanding resulting from more recently adopted linguistic cultures and their worldviews.

It is interesting to note that Sanneh did not address the Trinity much at all in the abovementioned book. The Christian message, according to him and other proponents of the translatability thesis, is translatable, even infinitely translatable, as Walls would have it, but is the Trinity translatable? Or is it not really central to the message itself? If the latter were the case, then it is obvious that the question of its translatability is a moot point, but one would imagine that the seriousness of the early church's contentions surrounding this theme would be enough to convince most reasonable readers that the Trinity really is central to the message. Hence, in spite of questions one might have regarding the concept's basic translatability, an overriding factor seems to be that it really should be translatable for Christianity to make sense. The question then becomes, how could this be done, and moreover, who is to be responsible for it?

I shall, in the final analysis, return to the point regarding interpretation, vantage point, and other terms I have used. First I want to pay attention to the ways in which the translation of the Trinity could work, or not. The theologian Christine Helmer is helpful in this regard, because in an essay on post-Reformation Trinitarian theology, she un.masks what she considers to be a false binary opposition in the conventional narrative between orthodoxy and Enlightenment:

## *The (Non-)Translatability of the Trinity*

*The received story that sees the Trinity as a triumph of orthodoxy represents the Enlightenment as eroding the fundamental doctrinal pillars of Christianity. Yet this caricature of the Enlightenment ... with its concomitant demand among cultured despisers of modernity that Christians resist it, must be questioned as to its representation of what happened. [The] alternative story, rather than demarcating the boundary between revelation and reason in antithesis, considers the far-reaching and exciting contributions of the Trinity to modern thinking (Helmer 2011:150).*

Helmer then goes on to show a number of interesting interpretations, translations if you will, of the Trinity in post-Enlightenment thought. One of the more interesting cases she mentions is that of Count Nicolas von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), the Pietistic Moravian sponsor of and inspiration for Protestant missions to far-flung lands. Helmer writes that von Zinzendorf's 'Jesus centered piety' did not detract him from seeing the 'Spirit as Mother, thereby implying a marital relation between Father and Spirit' (Helmer 2011:158).

Even more influential Trinitarian innovations, or translations into modern modes of thought, occurred in the writings of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Schleiermacher, respectively.

*Hegel situated the Trinity as the two end points of his 'metanarrative' system; the Trinity was his system's ground and goal ... [In] Schleiermacher's system ... the Trinity was a culmination of faith statements expressing the redemptive effects of Jesus and of the Spirit in the church, and ultimately through the church in the world. Both demonstrated how seriously the Trinity was to be taken in Western thought (Helmer 2011:165-166).*

Such openness to a specific kind of translatability when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity, it must be said, has itself been marginal in Christian theological thinking. Far more dominant is the view that Hegel et al. exchanged the traditional 'economy of salvation' idea associated with Trinitarian theology with the 'inner' life of God. This placed the Trinity in an abstract category devoid of much influence in the life of ordinary believers, according to Hegel's critics, of which there were many. One theologian taking this type of line of a much more negative influence of Enlightenment thinking on Trinitarianism is Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, who furthermore writes: 'Since the Enlightenment, the waning of the doctrine of the Trinity also has had to do with the rise of biblical and dogmatic critique. Whereas for even older Protestant theology, the Bible offered

proofs of the Trinity, biblical criticism of the Enlightenment destroyed that approach' (Kärkkäinen 2007:56).

Thus it is clear that not everyone would allow for the idea that the Trinity could be infinitely translatable, even into the depths of Enlightenment philosophy, for example. Nevertheless, Helmer's view is important for my purposes here, because she indicates that the concept of the Trinity was indeed not only not bound to early Christian discourse, it could even be translated into an allegedly religiously antagonistic epoch, such as the era of Enlightenment. Helmer even goes as far as to state: 'The Trinity gradually emerged as the central defining doctrine for Christianity by the end of this epoch because its ultimate systematic conceptualization satisfied the dual idioms of history and speculation that had been established by academic consensus' (Helmer 2011:166).

This, then, seems to be a strong endorsement of translatability, albeit an unlikely translatability when it comes to the Trinity. Trinitarian theology has similarly been translated by innovative theologians into systems of thought as diverse as feminism (see Fox 2011:274–290), black and liberation theology (see Díaz 2011:259–273), and African (Kombo 2007) and Asian (see Kim 2011:293–308) philosophies, to name but a few. I shall elaborate below a bit more on the African case, particularly. As could perhaps be expected, not everyone is convinced by such more recent innovations.

In a recent book with the title 'Divine Names and the Holy Trinity', Kendall Soulen commences by explicating the historical Jewish Christian embeddedness of the Holy Trinity, and follows this up with a discussion of more recent reinterpretations of Trinitarian dogma in the context of World Christianity. Soulen refers specifically to a keynote address given by Korean theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung at the Seventh General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, Australia in 1991. Chung on this occasion took the opportunity to reinterpret the life of the Trinity using Asian concepts such as the Korean *han*, which broadly denotes a kind of existential suffering, 'Ina (Tagalog for mother, also denoting the great goddess from whom all life comes); *ki* (a Northeast Asian concept denoting life energy and harmonious interconnection...; and *kwan in* (an East Asian divine personification of compassion and wisdom)' (Soulen 2011:15).

Hence this was creative translatability at work, showing linguistic fluidity and perhaps illustrating the essential truth of the translatability thesis. Yet, is such a translated trinity really still the Trinity? It seems that Chung's speech created quite a measure of controversy. Not all of her hearers were equally comfortable with the directions she took. As Tso Man

King, at the time general secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council, put it,

*the presentation drew both an overwhelming standing ovation and severe condemnation and criticism of syncretism and paganism ... It was obvious that Dr Chung's presentation received angry criticism not only because of her way of doing theology, which deviated from that of the Orthodox, but also because she utilized Korean resources and rituals that were considered as 'Gentile' (King 1991:355).*

In this case, it is clear that the critics understood the original formulation of the Trinity as sacrosanct, something that was not supposed to be creatively translatable. However, in objecting to the 'Gentile' elements in Chung's formulations, her critics were probably unaware of the original Gentile background of the Logos, which itself was such a cardinal aspect of early Trinitarian conceptualisation. That is a notable irony, but it clearly shows the untranslatability of the Trinity when approached from certain perspectives.

However, Andrew Walls, in writing about what he describes as the 'translation principle in Christian history', emphasises the connections between translation and incarnation. He even goes as far as to state: 'Incarnation is translation. When God in Christ became man, Divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language' (Walls 1996:27). Walls furthermore indicates how this aspect of Christianity makes it quite different from the other Abrahamic faiths. He states: 'At the heart of the Jewish faith, as at the heart of the Islamic faith, is the Prophetic Word – God speaks to humanity. At the heart of Christian faith is the Incarnate Word – God became human' (Walls 1996:47).

Walls shows how, from Christianity's first entrance into Gentile Hellenism, a link was established with the pre-Christian traditions. In the Hellenistic case, this occurred through the adoption of the title *Kyrios* to indicate Christ. By doing so, early Christians had effectively translated the Jewish concept of the messiah into a term that 'Hellenistic pagans gave to their cult divinities' (Walls 1996:34). That pattern had repeated itself in subsequent missionary translations of Christian scriptures into indigenous languages. Missionaries have often sought to identify a name in an indigenous language that the speakers identified with their understanding of a Supreme Being. Upon identifying such a name, those names were fairly routinely used to designate God in the vernacular translations of the Bible.

If the idea that God has many names is accepted, then what Walls describes makes sense. Translation means that words are interchangeable to convey similar meaning across cultural and linguistic boundaries. This has been a particularly successful aspect of translation in African Christianity as Walls, Sanneh and others have indicated. Regarding the Christianisation of African concepts of God through this type of translation, the African theologian James Henry Owino Kombo writes '[t]he implication of this is that *Nyame*, *Leza*, *Modimo*, and *Nyambe* will no longer refer to their respective native referents. The "Christianized" *Modimo*, for example, will have no need for the *badimo* and will certainly not have to be an *It* since he will have made himself known in the Son' (Kombo 2007:233).

With the above commentary about *Modimo* and the *badimo*, Kombo implies that in Sotho-Tswana communities, for example, the traditional name of the Supreme Being, *Modimo*, would be filled with new semantic content under Christian translation, whereas the ancestors (*badimo*) would become increasingly redundant religiously speaking. However, the concept of the Trinity, according to Kombo, in an African context is not solved by such translation.

Kombo's preferred name for God in the African context is 'the "Great *Muntu*", a "subject" with the ultimate personality and thus distinct from everyone and everything else' (Kombo 2007:235). However, to turn the Great *Muntu* into the Triune God of Christian theology is for Kombo apparently not a process that would spontaneously result from translation. On the contrary, this must be constructed in a deliberate way:

*[T]he African Christian thought must 'Yahweh-ize' the Great Muntu and name him in Trinitarian terms. This is a significant point of departure that must be deliberately addressed. The African context, as we have noted, knows monotheism, but the idea of God as Trinity is a completely new concept. ... It follows, therefore, that African theology should – with urgency – carefully and systematically Christianize the African sense of the Great Muntu (Kombo 2007:236–237).*

As could be expected, Kombo has a proposal for solving this perceived problem, which we do not have to go into at this point, because the purpose of quoting him is purely to indicate that, according to the most recent treatise that I could find by an African theologian writing on the subject of the Trinity in African Christianity, an Africanised version of this doctrine has to be introduced from the outside. The Trinity is not something that could be translated into pre-existent categories.

However, the above may not be the full story, nor the final word on the translatability of the Trinity into African Christianity, or indeed into any other aspect of World Christianity. One question is whether one considers the translation process to be exclusively the theologian's preserve, or whether one agrees with the above quote by Walls, which would have 'translation' more or less equated to 'incarnation'? If one holds the latter perspective, the process clearly does not belong to the academic theologian. To the contrary, translation would be a Spirit-imbued process occurring in the life of a community of faith. Through such a process, God incarnate, in other words the risen Christ, would become more and more visible to believers in their own linguistic and socio-cultural paradigm. That, I believe, is the implication of Walls's statement that 'incarnation is translation'. If we furthermore believe that the incarnate Logos, however translated, provides the necessity for a Trinitarian confession, as the early Christians evidently did, then it would follow that the Trinity would also become translated in one way or another into World Christian contexts, even if the original parameters surrounding the debate of early Trinitarian formulation no longer exist or even make sense to contemporary believers.

A related question is whether in contemporary contexts of World Christianity, where, for example, the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement plays such a central role, the very notion of belief in concepts continue to play such an important role as in former eras? This, admittedly, is a big question to throw out towards the end of an article on the Trinity, and I do not mean either to deal with it or brush it aside lightly. However, there are certain indications that historically, more recent forms of Christianity, such as Pentecostalism and African Initiated Christianity (AIC), are in some ways more deeply vested in orthopraxis than orthodoxy. What one does, how one speaks, how one worships, even what one wears on specific occasions may be of a greater concern than formulated concepts regarding beliefs in the abstract. This reflects my own experience of African Pentecostalism and AIC, but the observation is also borne out by what others have encountered. For example, one of the leading scholars of African Pentecostalism, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu from Ghana, writes similar things in reference to the American sociologist of religion, Harvey Cox. Asamoah-Gyadu states:

*Generally, African Pentecostals are not given to creedal confessions because of the oral nature of their theology, preferring to sing, dance, and pray their faith rather than recite it. ... Cox (1995:15) observes that while the beliefs of other religious groups are enshrined in formal theological systems, those of the Pentecostals are embedded in testimonies, ecstatic speech, and bodily movement indeed (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:128-129).*



Hence, these types of description, although they do not mention anything about specific beliefs such as the Trinity, would seem to bear out my contention that orthopraxis plays a greater role than orthodoxy. Or perhaps the term 'embodied faith' is an even better description of Pentecostal religiosity. Whatever the case, the suggestion seems to be that if the Trinity features in this type of setting, if the Trinity has indeed been translated through an incarnational process, if you will, then the Trinity may form part, perhaps even an integral part, of the lived spirituality encountered in these churches. This may be so, even if the centrality of the Trinity in such churches may not be obvious to an outside observer. Of course, this is a radically different conception of the Trinity from the confessional emphasis of the early church, or of the Reformed tradition, for that matter; but within an understanding of 'translation' as 'incarnation', a Trinity expressed in worship rather than confessed as a matter of individual belief actually seems like a fair example of translatability.

#### 5. Conclusion: Translatability and static versus fluid conceptions of the Trinity

I have purposefully entitled my article the (non-)translatability of the Holy Trinity to indicate the ambivalent responses that could be given to such a theme, if framed as a question. Unquestionably, the Trinity as a doctrine, even if a very central Christian doctrine, falls into a different category from the Gospel or Message such as expounded upon by proponents of the translatability thesis in Christian history, such as Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls. However, with the early church having given such enormous weight to the correct formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, and with the subsequent theological tradition in Christian history broadly agreeing with the centrality of a Trinitarian conception of God, it seems inevitable that if the Gospel is infinitely translatable, so is the Trinity. At least so it should be. I have indicated that there has been no shortage in terms of theological creativity when it came to attempts to re-interpret or translate the Trinity in different World Christian contexts. That such attempts were unacceptable for some should not be surprising. Translation is always risky, and it is threatening to those clinging to dearly held 'original' formulations. One's response to such efforts perhaps comes down to whether one has a static or concrete view of the Trinity cast in the proverbial stone of its original formulation, or whether one has a fluid, or even an organic perspective. In the former case, a specific formulation of the confession would be sacrosanct. However, if you are prepared to consider the Trinity more organically, perhaps by prioritising the incarnational aspect that is inherent to the confession, then both creative reinterpretations of the doctrine as well as a de-emphasis of the doctrine

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itself in favour of the lived religion as seen in much of contemporary Christianity would not be threatening at all. Perhaps the Trinity should simply be trusted to manifest Godself in all God's vulnerable oneness. After all, if the Trinity really is the Trinity, then our anxiety over the theological concept's translatability, or not, would really be missing the mark. Worshipping the Trinity would be the more appropriate course of action.



# The Trinity and Poststructuralism

Anné Verhoef

## 1. Poststructuralism and the Trinity

The Trinity is the ‘most proper’ naming of the Absolute, the identity of the particular revelation of God within Christianity. ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ is the specific Christian name for God, the ‘historical particularity of God’s identity’ (Peters 1998:343), the ‘traditional faith expression’ (Bentley 2017:6) in Christianity, or as the Trinitarian theologian Robert Jenson says, the Trinity is ‘a maximally compressed version of the one God’s particular story’ (2010:35).<sup>1</sup>

The Trinity is fundamentally part of the ‘historical resources’ of Christianity, without which philosophical theology run the risk of ‘becoming empty’ (Gregersen 2013:417). The philosopher Richard Kearney identifies this risk in his reaction to the critique of poststructuralism<sup>2</sup> that God is the ‘infinite desertification of language’ (Derrida 1995:55–56; Meylahn 2016:4), unknowable and unnameable. Kearney consequently asks, ‘Does deconstructive “faith” not risk becoming so empty that it loses faith in the here and now altogether?’ (2010:64). The critique of poststructuralism cannot be ignored either, because one may thereby lapse into a sort of postmodern fideism and ‘apathetic pluralism’ (Schrijvers 2016:4). How are we, then, to think about the critique and implications of post-structuralism and the particularity and naming of the Trinity?

1 For Robert Jenson, God is Trinity because of God’s involvement through history, through the Father, Son and Spirit, which belongs essentially to the life of the one God. The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. God is thus identified as Trinity through this historical involvement, through ‘his story’, and it is not the outcome of some abstract debate regarding how three can be one or vice versa (Verhoef, 2008:235).

2 Poststructuralism and deconstruction is not understood here as synonyms. Deconstruction is positioned within the larger poststructuralist movement which focuses on the gaps and ambiguities in the system of meaning. Poststructuralists find meaning in these ambiguities, while deconstruction ‘never overcomes the radical moment of ambiguating meaning’ (Harcourt, 2007:22). This article follows Derrida’s poststructuralist deconstruction as a starting point and moves then to the more ‘positive’ aspects of poststructuralism.

Many theologians and philosophers have engaged with these questions for the past few decades and the aim of this article is not to repeat or summarise all their arguments.<sup>3</sup> The focus here is on how the Trinity is deconstructed in *The Brand New Testament* and how it opens up different imaginings of God which may not be too far removed from the biblical description. It gives an idea of how the Trinity can be thought of differently within the 'playfulness' of deconstruction.

Post-structuralism, especially developed in the deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida, posits that language is not a transparent medium that connects one directly with a 'truth' or 'reality' outside language, but that we remain in language as a structure or code. Wisse states that 'the starting point of deconstruction is that the real, the given, is unavailable, is always beyond what we know' (2010:68). All that we have is a 'trace': no finality is given in language about the final meaning, or about that which is signified by the signifier, so that language itself is always 'trapped' within this endless referencing (*différance*).<sup>4</sup> Derrida famously argued that 'there is nothing outside the text [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]' (1997:158). Thus, 'there is nothing outside of the text that one can have access to without language, which is not also text' (Meylahn 2012:1).

The emptying of meaning that *différance* names has a close proximity to allegory (Ward 2003:80) and negative theology, but it does not necessitate (or equate to) negative theology (Coward & Foshay 1992; Meylahn 2016:4). The implication is that a deferral (referral, postponement) of meaning takes place, that naming is contentless, and that we have a 'bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language' (Derrida 1998:59). For John Caputo, the implication of this for religion is that religion is 'without religion' (1997:161–181), without commitment to or identification with any particular concrete religion or god. Naming (a) god (for example, as 'Trinity') is possible only in 'religious discourse', 'God-talk' or 'theopoetics', which admits not to logic (theologic), but to

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3 For example, Graham Ward's 'Deconstructive Theology' in: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Lieven Boeve & Christophe Brabant's, *Between Philosophy and Theology* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010) and Frederiek Depoortere's, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

4 The structure of language and signification is described by Derrida as the representational dimension of '*différance*' – a play on the fact that the French word *différer* means both 'to defer' and 'to differ'.

*a poetics of what stirs within the name of God, within what 'we' call 'God'. Since these quasi-phenomenological forms of theo-poetics never reach the stasis of a fundamental Absolute reality, one must acknowledge that religion is Vorstellungen all the way down! (Caputo 2014:52)*

For Caputo (following Derrida's deconstruction) there is no Absolute ground to religion, so that we can only have a 'religion without religion', a theo-poetic. This boils down to a sort of contentless faith, a 'passion of *non-savoir* [not knowing], impassioning the desire for the impossible and the unforeseeable' (Caputo 1997:312). Caputo breaks with 'any such metaphysical Absolute and settles for feeling around in the dark for the underlying 'events' (2014:52). Theo-poetics should, however, not be only negatively assessed. Meylahn observes that it brings a 'vulnerable inconclusivity and an active expectant openness' (2012:8) and this may help theology 'to steer away from "theopoetry" (absolute knowledge; fundamentalism) and "theopolitics" (a battle of the gods) which is often found in metaphysical theology' (Verhoef 2017:177). It is challenging but not impossible to think about Christianity (Trinity) in this context, where the 'transcendental signifier' is lost, and to 'move out of sterile debates of endless deconstruction' (Schrijvers 2016:xi). It asks for a more playful approach to our beliefs, without discarding them altogether. Schrijvers argues in his recent book *Between faith and belief* (2016) that one should dynamically 'move between faith and belief' without abandoning either.

## 2. Deconstruction and living between faith and belief

Critique to Caputo's 'religion without religion' is that it 'remains stuck in the religions it wants to overcome or otherwise do away with' (Schrijvers 2016:xv). In this formula, 'religion' remains even if it is 'without': religion without religion is an acknowledgment that faith (religion) is crucial for life, something inescapable, but this faith (religion) is without Absolute content (religion) and without beliefs. In this formula, faith remains connected to some content or beliefs and is a 'religion' not completely 'without' religion. Schrijvers argues that an immunisation of faith from belief is impossible, but that other practices, such as sports and excessive consumption, have 'taken the place of religion in contemporary society' (2016:xv). Atheists who want to do entirely 'without religion' (faith without beliefs) may therefore either lose faith altogether – 'a genuine loss of faith' (Schrijvers 2016:xv) with an indifference to all things escaping our finite lives – or be lured into some other beliefs. Some theists who want 'religion with religion' (with the emphasis on Absolute beliefs) rather than 'religion without religion' may fall prey to the power of a sovereignty, to a 'dictatorship of tradition' (Schrijvers 2016:xvi) where the horizon of life

is exhausted by the horizon of religion. Caputo concludes that 'religion with religion ... will always turn out to be somebody's religion' (2012:342). This poses the problem of theopolitics (battle of gods) and of fideism, as mentioned above.

Caputo's solution to this dilemma of how much 'with/without' of religion is needed, is to opt for a 'weak religion'. It is 'weak' because we cannot name the god properly. Christianity (and by implication the Trinity) is for Caputo 'a name for a historical set of beliefs that is always but a historical construction (and therefore subject to change and deconstruction). Christianity is immersed in the deconstructive play of the traces, where what we are trying to name can only ever be named inappropriately' (Schrijvers 2016:133). Consequently there is no absolute, no name (for example, 'Trinity') that lies outside the 'system of Christianity'. This makes it a 'weak' religion, or a religion 'without religion'. The 'religion' in this formula is then described as 'a vitalistic force' (Schrijvers 2016:133) that rages through our being as a 'weak force'. The religion is 'weak' because no absolutes can be named, no sovereign power is claimed, and there is no dictatorship of religion. It comes down to a 'faith that can do (almost) without belief or at least one that assents to beliefs minimally' (Schrijvers 2016:136). This assertion fits into the postmodern rejection of an ultimate signifier or grand metanarrative. It allows for a deconstruction of the most central beliefs of Christianity, like the name 'Trinity' for God, without rejecting it completely. It deconstructs it in a playful manner to get a sense of 'what keeps us going', what 'directs us toward our futures' and of 'our questioning of our existence, hopes and desires' – our faith in life itself – that does not commit to ultimate answers (beliefs), but functions within the non-authoritative (weak) force of 'weak religion'.

While this notion of Caputo may seem very abstract and theoretical, different art forms in our contemporary culture have translated it into concrete and practical terms. *The Brand New Testament* is one such example which may be used to illustrate some implications of this post-structural reading of the Trinity, especially for thinking about 'God as ONE: The Holy Trinity' (the title of this special edition). I will then briefly return to the question of Schrijvers regarding the relationship between faith and belief, and also explore Richard Kearney's concept of Anatheism in this movie's post-structural reading of the Trinity.

### 3. The Trinity in 'The Brand New Testament'

Because *post-structuralist deconstruction* is a loaded and contested term, I will confine my understanding to Jean-Luc Nancy's description that 'to



deconstruct means to take apart, to disassemble, to loosen the assembled structure in order to give some play to the possibility from which it emerged but which it, qua assembled structures, hides' (2008:148). This applies to the Trinity in *The Brand New Testament*. In the movie, God is not only Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but also has a wife and a ten-year-old daughter, Ea (the name for the Akkadian god of wisdom). Reference to the 'Trinity' here is not intended to be faithful to a certain religious tradition or text, but rather to deconstruct the 'assembled structure' and to create a playfulness in order to expose what is not said, what else should be said, and what power structures are at play in what we say about the Trinity. It involves a 'deconstruction' of the Trinity and not a 'destruction', in an attempt to gain more insight into this concept.

*The Brand New Testament* was directed by the Belgian director Jaco Van Dormael and released in 2015.<sup>5</sup> It is described as a 'wickedly amusing religious satire' (Holden 2016:1), a 'clever spiritual comedy' and as 'cheerfully blasphemous' (Chang 2016:1). The film's creative retelling of the Christian story should not be dismissed as blasphemy. Hoffman (2015:1) argues that 'if you can get past the initial blasphemy you'll find a highly moral film' and that the film 'is a vision of optimism, of people being given the opportunity to help one another and doing it with tenderness.' The movie can be seen as a retelling of the Christian story – and specifically of the Trinity – that can challenge our interpretation of the more original version, very much as one would find in the Jewish Midrash tradition. For believers and non-believers alike it may open up new, positive ways of thinking about God (as a deconstructive reading of any text can do with regard to any concept).

In *The Brand New Testament* the reference to the Trinity takes place in a secularised context and society. This speaks of a 'deep indebtedness' to Christian symbols and concepts which are still present in this society. The movie is embedded in the Christian tradition, but its postmodern philosophical approach to Christianity and the Trinity is not one of a 'deep commitment' with regard to the name itself or its authority. Rather, these symbols 'give rise to thought'<sup>6</sup> without the pretention or aim (as

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5 Van Dormael states in an interview about the film that he does not believe in God, but that there is something in common between religion and cinema, namely (and here he is quoting Deleuze) that they try to make you believe life could have a meaning (Preston, 2016:1).

6 Here I follow the thoughts of Ricoeur. In Westphal's (2008:115) discussion of Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology of religion, he says that 'the philosopher, as such, does not, but rather can be described, where the symbol gives rise to thought, as one deeply indebted to these texts but not deeply committed to them'.

mostly in theology) to be authoritative. In this 'weak' religion, authority is continuously questioned, but the concept of religion (or the name) is not completely abandoned. My discussion of the movie will focus on these aspects. Thus, an analysis will be given of how the reference to the Trinity, along with the deconstruction thereof, functions within a 'religion without religion' as presented within *The Brand New Testament*. The underlying objective will be to identify positive aspects for one's life's direction, fulfilment and meaning in a post-structuralist reading of the movie's presentation of the Trinity.

The plot of the film is quite simple. God, the father, lives in a Brussels high-rise building, where he spends most of his time at his computer devising new tortures for the human race. God's son, JC, managed to escape earlier, but he was killed by the people he wanted to help. No mention is made of the Holy Spirit, but in the movie God's wife fulfils the role of this third person of the Trinity. She is not the only female member of the godhead: there is also a daughter in the family, Jesus' younger sister, Ea. The father, mother, son and daughter are thus a gender-balanced deconstructed presentation of the Trinity. The Trinity is deconstructed into a fourfold godhead where the Holy Spirit is replaced by God's wife and where a younger sister is added. Even more significant than this feminine balancing of God is the 'balancing' of God's power in the movie. God is normally portrayed as powerful, with his power connected to the person of the Father as creator, but the roles and powers are reversed in the movie. Here, God the father loses his power, and the daughter Ea gains power, albeit not the same or absolute power. She has a vulnerable and exposed power, even a helplessness, typical of a ten-year-old girl.

In the beginning of the movie, Ea manages to send all people their time and date of death. This removes God's power as the provider of one's time of (life and) death, and consequently people no longer fear him. Suddenly, with the knowledge of their date of death, everybody is confronted with what to do with the rest of their lives.<sup>7</sup> Ea's next move is to escape from the household to continue her brother's work. Her mission includes recruiting six apostles. The rest of the story centres on her mission and how six ordinary contemporary persons become her apostles.

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7 This is the crucial point on which the rest of the story centres, although it does not come across very strongly. The point is that God's power has been removed and that people no longer fear him. The more pertinent question for humans is now about their own existence and its meaning. The aspect of the death dates becomes a metaphor for contemporary society's lack of fear for God and the rejection of his (super)natural power. It thus introduces the existential questions of contemporary secular society.

The apostles do not actually follow her, but this was not her intention either. Nevertheless, after Ea has met these people, their lives change for the better. They have profound life-changing experiences and become able to live meaningful lives despite their knowledge of when they will die.

In meeting the six apostles, the ten-year-old Ea does not represent a powerful authoritative God, but still manages to create some meaning and fulfilment for them. Ea's actions illustrate how meaning and fulfilment may still be created within the powerlessness of a 'religion without religion' and an absence of religious authority. Ea does not represent 'without religion' (because she remains part of the 'Trinity') but she does not represent 'religion' in the dogmatic authoritative sense either. The way in which she manages to change peoples' lives for the better illustrates the potential of (and need for) a 'religion without religion' as directional and meaningful for life. Ea's actions and the apostles' reactions form part of the movie's post-structuralist reading and representation of the Trinity. The Trinity is not deconstructed to a point of meaninglessness – this would be destruction. Instead, it is reimagined as a powerless, gender-neutral 'god' whose life-giving potencies and caring/loving relations are recognised, but reformulated. To explain this, an analysis is given of Ea's 'powerful powerless' interactions with the six apostles and their reactions.

#### 4. Ea's interaction with the six apostles

It is clear from the beginning that all six apostles are missing something, either physically, emotionally or spiritually. They are not only intensely aware of their finitude (after receiving the date and time of their deaths) but are all trapped in some way. They are deeply in need of redemption. It is not primarily their finitude that is troublesome for them, but their entrapment, which prohibits them from living a fulfilled life here and now.

The changes Ea brings into their lives when they become apostles are not directed at an eternal life or a redemption from sin. She helps them to find fullness, meaning and happiness within *this* life, within their unique circumstances and for their unique needs. Ea's engagement with the six persons is not intended to change them in order to honour and praise a supernatural being or god. Ea is concerned with the apostles' own lives, their needs and their potential to celebrate life and love. In the movie Jesus tells his sister Ea to pick the apostles randomly and to make their apostleship all about themselves. They must not become apostles of Ea, Jesus or God, but apostles of life itself – not in a narcissistic, destructive and indulgent way, but in loving, sharing appreciation and joy of life.

The randomly selected apostles represent major needs of humanity, particularly in modern secular West European society. These needs are,

however, also universally applicable, and this illustrates Van Dormael's sharp diagnosis of the entrapments and emptiness of modern society. The six apostles' needs are significant of the typical burdens of modern people. These problems have become destructive to their lives, and they cannot resolve them on their own, as becomes clear in an analysis of the apostles' individual stories.

#### 4.1 Aurelie

The narrator describes Aurelie as a 'super nice girl' and 'the doormat of the whole building'. She is a beautiful but reclusive woman who lost her left arm as a child in a freak accident. Because of this, her life philosophy is: 'Life is like an ice rink... a lot of people fall.' Life, for her, is to experience unavoidable, unexplainable pain, loss and suffering. Life is a risky place where one inevitably gets hurt. Her lost arm has become a symbol and constant reminder of this philosophy. Her loss and pain are not only physical, but she also has deep emotional scars which result in cynicism and sadness. She has lost not only her arm, but also her faith in the goodness and love of life. She is convinced nobody will love her because of her physical and psychological loss. For her, there are only loneliness and pain left in this dangerous world. Like her right arm, she has no companion, and she lives alone. She avoids the risk of love and life itself.

Upon discovering her death date, she decides to continue her life as before. Then Ea meets her and gives her a dream of her left hand, dancing on the table before her and eventually touching her right hand. This dream hints that life can be more than pain and loss. Life is not *without* pain and loss, but it is possible to find some comfort and healing in one's loss (as is illustrated by her left hand touching her right hand).

Aurelie changes after her dream, as she accepts that there may be more to life than pain and loss. This acceptance creates an openness and willingness for her to be loved and to take risks. When François, the fourth apostle, later tells her that he loves her, she manages to accept it, to believe it and to return his love. When he kisses her prosthetic hand, it is a sign of his tender acceptance of life's loss, pain and risks. It is also a sign of his love for her that heals her loss, and of love's power to heal some of life's pains. Ea's intervention helps Aurelie realise that there is more in this world than pain, loss and suffering. Aurelie needed to see exactly this, even if it was just in a dream for a start.

#### 4.2 Jean-Claude

The insurance worker, Jean-Claude, has lost his sense for adventure, his free spirit, his imagination, his gist and his freedom. He has traded

the hours of his life for 'a shitty job with shitty hours'. He is trapped in his work and daily routine. As a child he had a wild and adventurous imagination, but now his world has become very small: Jean-Claude has climbed the corporate ladder, but he has never lived his dreams and has become trapped in a monotonous, boring life.

When Jean-Claude learns the date of his death, he decides to sit on a bench in a park and never move from there. Here Ea meets him and acts as an interpreter between him and a bird. Jean-Claude asks the bird why he stays in the park while he can fly anywhere in the world. The bird replies that he can ask the same of him. Jean-Claude then experiences a dramatic conversion. He rises from the bench and starts to walk, following birds all over the world, to the Arctic Circle. His sense of adventure and his imagination are renewed and enjoyed. He lives his dreams. Ea has sparked this by giving him an awareness of nature and birds and the freedom they enjoy. Ea thus helps him realise that life should not be reduced to something monotonous and boring. Nature, with all its freedom and splendour, reminds one of life's excitement and fullness.

#### 4.3 Marc

Marc describes himself as a sex maniac. He is sexually frustrated, awkward with women and lovesick. He longs for his lost love, but this is only a fixation with a girl he had met on holiday as a child. Now he is trapped in this lovesick nostalgia, which has become a sexual obsession, with the result that he cannot meet the right woman and companion for him. True love is an impossibility in this life. Sex has now become a substitute and comfort, but it is such a dominant force that Marc has become entrapped by it. In this process, life is reduced to sex and people are reduced to sex objects.

When Marc learns when he will die, he decides to spend his last days and all his money on prostitutes. He cannot get enough of sex. He imagines all women being naked and available – inevitably reduced to sex objects. Visiting prostitutes gives him only temporary relief, and he quickly spends more money on prostitutes than he had initially planned. When Ea eventually meets him, he is penniless. She tells him he has a beautiful voice and that he should look for work. He manages to find work as a voice actor, ironically for pornographic movies. In this new working context, where sex is completely bereft of intimacy or meaning, he gets to know his female co-worker better on a personal level. They talk about things such as literature and joke about wrong sayings. In this hyper-sexualised context, sex ironically disappears, and Marc is able to see his co-worker as a human being. In a world full of sex, he sees the person herself and realises

that there is more to life than sex. His co-worker turns out to be the girl on whom he had become fixated as a child, but now he gets to know her as a person and not as a sex object. This leads to a fulfilling relationship, with meaningful and enjoyable sex. Sex remains part of this world, but so does the possibility of true love.

Marc's conversion to an apostle of Ea's takes place on different levels. His entrapment and his loss used to lie in his cynicism of true love, where he saw people (including himself) as sex objects and not as persons or human beings. His conversion as an apostle changes his perspective. He regains his belief in true love and becomes able to see others and himself differently. It all starts with Ea's interventions when she admires a unique human quality about him: his voice. This helps him to think differently about himself and eventually also about others. His identity changes from a self-declared sex maniac to Marc, a person amongst other persons. His conversion involves obtaining a more humane view of people. This leads to a fulfilled, meaningful and intimate relationship. All that Ea does is to make him aware of his unique human quality, his voice, so that he can see himself as human again. This helps him to see others as humans and to find his true love.

#### 4.4 François

François, a life insurance salesman, is called the assassin. He has always loved death. As a child he never cried, was never sad, and liked to kill ants, flies, butterflies, mice and birds. He says to kill is his 'deep nature' and he even describes killing as his vocation. When he learns when he will die, he quits his job, buys a rifle and starts shooting at people, believing that he will kill only those who are meant to die anyway. He argues he is 'merely the hand of destiny' and he is just the 'ferryman who helps people to cross the gap between life and death'. He therefore believes that there is nothing more to life than fate. His work as a life insurance salesman reinforces that belief. He experiences fate as an overwhelming force and has nothing to live for, to get excited about, or even to cry about.

When Ea meets him, she challenges fate or destiny by telling him to shoot the next woman who crosses the bridge. This woman turns out to be the first apostle, Aurelie. The bullet hits her in her prosthetic arm, without her even noticing it. François is baffled by this incident and starts thinking that there may be something more to life than just fate. He follows Aurelie to her home and eventually realises what has happened: this woman was first a victim of fate, but is now also a survivor of it – twice now. This changes his own self-understanding, and he realises that life is not

mere fate but that he may take risks and even love people. He falls in love with Aurelie and eventually embraces his own image in the mirror.

Francois' conversion is from an understanding of life as fate, meaningless and empty, to embracing the wonders, mystery and surprises of life. He realises there is more to life than fate. People live despite fate or as survivors of fate. Life is bigger than fate and may even include being loved and experiencing joy. When Aurelie later asks him later to stop shooting at people and he answers that he has lost interest in that, he implies that fate is not the major force in life, but that life itself is. He is free to love, despite fate. Ea brought about his conversion merely by challenging the power of fate.

#### 4.5 Martine

Martine is an elderly housewife trapped in a loveless marriage. Since childhood she has been predisposed to romantic love, but experiences only loneliness. She is rich and tries to compensate for her loneliness by shopping, having spa treatments, and even paying a young boy for sex. All this only increases her loneliness.

When Ea meets Martine, she takes her to the circus – not to have fun, but to help her recognise something of herself. At the circus Martine sees a gorilla in a cage, also trapped, also lonely. This makes Martine realise her own loneliness and captivity. As a result, Martine ('to get her house in order') takes action to escape her loneliness and captivity. She buys the gorilla from the circus and lets him live in her house. She sets him free so that she can be free. The gorilla gives her unconditional love and loyalty and takes away her loneliness. He even scares away her disloyal husband. Martine's life is transformed from loneliness to fulfilment through Ea's intervention. Yet, Ea does not perform any miracle but only helps her see something of her need, so that Martine can take control of her own life, take responsibility and create her own happiness.

#### 4.6 Willy

The last apostle, Willy, is a boy the same age as Ea. He has always been sickly. His mother is overprotective and has made him even more ill with all the medicine she gives him. When he learns that he has only a few days to live, he decides to live his last days as a girl. He is trapped in a gender identity that does not suit him. He wants to be free of all the expectations of being a boy. When Ea meets him they talk about the destructive expectations parents have of their children. Willy concludes that 'we live in a totally shitty world' and Ea replies that it is her father's (God's) fault because he is power hungry, and that her mother (who is also a goddess)



is silenced by her father. This is a clear critique of patriarchy and gender roles/identity.

The miracles Ea performs for Willy do not demonstrate power, but rather celebrate the simplicity of being human. She multiplies sandwiches for them to eat and also sends Willy a dream about a fish that wants to go back to the sea. The fish, just like Willy, longs for an environment where he can flourish, be free and live life in its fullness. Willy immediately understands that he needs this space, 'the sea'. His conversion entails first doing everything possible to get to the sea (for example, selling all his parents' furniture). Then he and Ea decide to call every day a 'month' instead of a 'day'. In this way he lives seven more months instead of seven days – time becomes relativised. Thirdly, he and Ea celebrate and enjoy every day together by listening to music and dancing. Lastly, he discovers new abilities, such as moving his hat towards his hand by only looking at it. The sickly, depressed Willy is transformed into a joyful and powerful boy-girl. Again (as with Aurelie), Ea's main intervention is to help him understand his dream.

With Willy, there is an interesting role reversal. Ea, as God's daughter, is not omnipotent – for example, she cannot cry. Willy teaches her to 'cry', to love and to enjoy life. God, as Ea, learns from humans and receives joy and love from humans. Ea describes Willy as a miracle *to her*, because he is someone who teaches her of life and love.

##### 5. The life-giving potencies of a 'religion without religion'

The six apostles' lives portray six existential challenges which can cause entrapment, suspicion and destruction in contemporary life. The first (Aurelie) is pain, suffering and loss – the unavoidable sadness of life. The second (Jean-Claude) is the experience of being trapped in a boring daily routine with the loss of one's sense of adventure and imagination. The third (Marc) is the loss of love, with life being reduced to sex and people (including himself) being reduced to sex objects. The fourth (Francois) is the experience of fate as an overwhelming, all-determining force. The fifth (Martine) is entrapment in a loveless relationship (marriage) and loneliness. The sixth (Willy) is entrapment in a gender identity (or other expectation of a person) that does not suit one. All six apostles manage to overcome these deeply existential challenges with the help of Ea. She helps them find possibilities within this world and within themselves to love and live, and to 'overcome their natural impulses toward suspicion, hostility and violence' (Chang 2016:1). Ea inspires the apostles to change their lives for the better; to become apostles of life itself, so to speak. This 'cheerfully blasphemous movie' can therefore be described as a 'pointed



hopeful vision of what life might be (with the right girl in charge)' (Chang 2016:1).

This girl is powerless, however. She represents the opposite of God the father in terms of age and gender. She exercises her limited power by helping people see things differently, by giving them dreams and by challenging their set conceptions of themselves and of life. As part of the 'Trinity' she seeks to empower people to live a full and meaningful life – one of happiness, love and joy. The question is whether there is anything religious or godly in Ea's intervention in these peoples' lives. In other words: is Ea (and the Trinity she represents) representative of religion *without* religion?

The six apostles' conversions are clearly not conventional religious conversions in the sense of adopting a certain religion or denomination, or following a god or a person (Ea). Rather, they convert to life in its fullness. There remains something 'religious' in these 'non-religious religious' conversions, however, because of the religious context and narrative in which they take place. A new *religious* story is told – *The Brand New Testament* – which follows upon the foregoing testaments. The Christian symbolism, Ea's identity as part of the 'Trinity', the setting in Catholic Belgium and the scenes in the church all provide the religious context for the film in which these conversions take place. At the end the apostles even form a new community that gathers at the beach to read from the 'Brand New Testament'.

The format and tone of the story and conversions are religious, but absolute or traditional religious content or beliefs play no (or a minimal) role. No name or sovereign power is claimed, but some of the most central beliefs of Christianity are upheld, such as the belief in the goodness of life itself. Ea represents this vitalistic force and hopeful optimism for love and life. As part of the Trinity she breaks down the absolute notion of it. The Trinity is only a symbol, only an entry point from where a fundamental and inclusive appreciation of life in its fullness is exposed, through the process of deconstruction. There is a post-structuralist reading of the 'Holy Trinity' in this movie, to arrive at the 'one god' of love, hope and life. It is a belief of minimal nature (a post-structuralist deconstructed 'Trinity'), but of huge importance for faith. Schrijvers (2016) emphasises the importance of both faith and belief.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Schrijvers finds this minimal notion of belief in the ontological understanding of love as explicated in the work of Binswanger. This corresponds well with this article's argument, where Ea represents a fundamental, ontological, vitalistic force that enables us to love and live – a love that confirms that we are not mere beings (as in Heidegger's ontology).

*The Brand New Testament* presents conversion narratives in a Christian context and reference frame, but without a Christian god and beliefs in this reference frame, these conversions are not 'Christian'. This begs the question whether Christian beliefs are the only criteria for 'Christian conversions' – and perhaps the movie confronts its viewers with exactly this question through its post-structuralist presentation of the Trinity. Is a life directed on the beauty, goodness, fullness and hopefulness of life not fundamentally similar to Christianity? Are there specific beliefs that must come into play, and what are they? On this point, *The Brand New Testament* challenges the concept of the Trinity and absolute beliefs. It is amplified by the fact that the movie has a playfulness and disregard for some of the most fundamental beliefs of Christianity. God is not good, but mean. He has a wife and a daughter. If certain beliefs are part of Christianity, what are they, and can (and should) they not be deconstructed to understand their underlying nature? Is this not a way of apprehending and comprehending the 'one god' in a more inclusive and even more 'Christian' way?

The movie brings into scope the contested nature of religious beliefs in general. The apostles' conversions are similar to religious conversions: spiritual, deeply private, and inseparable from the emotional and psychological domains of existence. How, then, are religious conversions different? If it requires a reference to God, the movie would immediately put questions on the table such as: What god? Is God not perhaps the endless playful creativity, the power of love and life itself? One should therefore be open to a less dogmatic concept of God. This is the life-giving, optimistic, hopeful vision we find in the conversion narratives in the movie.

## 6. Kearney's anatheism

The Catholic philosopher Richard Kearney's concept (and book) *Anatheism* and the subtitle of this book, *Returning to God after God*, resonate with the conversion narratives of the apostles in the movie. Anatheism is a 'movement – not a state – that refuses all absolute talk about the absolute, negative or positive; for it acknowledges that the absolute can never be understood *absolutely* by any single person or religion' (Kearney 2010:16). Kearney explains that anatheism is not atheism or theism, not anti-atheism or anti-theism, but a 'form of post-theism' (2010:57); '*amor mundi*, love of the life-world as embodiment of infinity in the finite, of transcendence in immanence, of eschatology in the now' (2010:166). This *amor mundi* which Kearney describes has a clear resemblance with the apostles' new-found direction in their lives. They find a strange 'god' after God – not the mean, powerful god of Ea's father. Such a god is rejected by Kearney, who argues that we are 'free from the three-headed monster of metaphysics –

the Omni-God of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence – and the “triumphalist teleologies and ideologies of power” that it has provoked’ (Manoussakis 2006:xvi). All these ‘omnis’ are absent in Ea, the 10-year-old girl who is nonetheless part of the Trinity. It is the patriarchal power of God, the Trinity, that is first deconstructed in *The Brand New Testament*.

The second concept to be deconstructed is absolute beliefs about God. The six apostles in the movie do not use religious language or creeds to confess their new-found faith. Their conversions rather involve graceful acceptance and celebration of the wonders of life. They accept an openness that there may be something more in life than pain, fate, loneliness and captivity. It is atheistic in the sense that the ‘God after God’ is a ‘source beyond and beneath oneself, a superfluity one does not possess or manipulate’ (Kearney 2010:179), but the theistic element of ana-*theism* is radically reimagined and reconceptualised. Although the apostles do not use language of ‘the sacred’ or ‘deep mystical’ to describe their conversions, these remain profound experiences which lead to new appreciation of life and dramatic, positive changes in their lives. They find hope, love and meaning on a very mundane, corporeal and immanent level. In that sense, these conversions are examples of the life-giving potencies of a ‘religion without a religion’. The answer to Kearney’s question (in the beginning of this article): ‘Does deconstructive “faith” not risk becoming so empty that it loses faith in the here and now altogether?’ (2010:64) is therefore negative.

Even if God is unknowable or unnameable, faith in life remains possible. Even in the context of endless deconstruction, there is a way of moving beyond the sterile debates, to find a more open and playful approach to beliefs which may provide a hopeful vision of life. With the transcendental signifier ‘lost’, *everything* is not lost. The poststructuralist deconstructed Trinity in *The Brand New Testament* is significant in this regard: although God cannot be named in absolute terms, the playful and imaginative identification of ‘God’ opens up possibilities of life, love and hope.

## 7. Conclusion

*The Brand New Testament* is a welcome contribution – very much in the Midrash Jewish tradition – of retelling the old Christian narratives to open some new and challenging perspectives, especially on the Trinity. The movie presents a poststructuralist imagining of the Trinity, which challenges absolute beliefs, patriarchy and power structures in religious symbols and concepts. It presents a ‘religion without religion’ without

falling prey to the power of a sovereignty or the dictatorship of (religious) tradition.

While a deconstructive understanding of the Trinity may lead to a complete 'religion without religion', this movie presents a more positive and hopeful notion. It does not immunise faith from belief. It presents a 'religion without religion', but not an empty, meaningless religion. This religion has its own life-giving potencies. In the movie, the 'Trinity' is not understood as an absolute belief (religion) but neither is it rejected or ignored (without religion). The minimal belief it represents (religion without religion), plays a 'directional' and life-giving role. A total loss of faith in life, with a consequent indifference to all things that escape our finite lives, therefore does not occur. The movie acknowledges throughout that there is more to life than mere being and finiteness, and this needs to be discovered in various ways.

In this poststructuralist 'reading' of *The Brand New Testament*, the Trinity is deconstructed to the 'one god', as the encompassing love, hope and life which we may experience in this life. This powerless 'god' is playfully revealed as having the same fundamental characteristics – love, joy and life – as the (biblical) Trinity. It remains a 'religion without religion', but allows for the 'oneness of god' to include more, and less, than the 'Holy Trinity'.

## The Trinity and Participation

Robert Vosloo

### 1. The promise of trinitarian theology for rethinking the Christian moral life

There has been a remarkable renaissance or revival in trinitarian studies over the last few decades. It is not the intention in this paper to trace the genesis of this development or to highlight possible reasons for this revival, but rather to call attention to the promise and problems of relating the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian moral life. Many of the recent studies in trinitarian theology have attempted consciously to relate the Trinity to Christian practice. Catherine LaCugna, for instance, writes in the introduction of her book *God For Us* (meaningfully subtitled *The Trinity and Christian Life*) that the doctrine of the Trinity 'is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life'.<sup>1</sup>

This concern for Christian practice is also evident in two more recent studies, namely David Cunningham's book *These Three Are One* (subtitled *The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*) and Paul Fiddes's book *Participating in God* (subtitled *A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*).<sup>2</sup> This paper is by and large a searching engagement with the latter two studies.

While the constructive proposals of the different theologians writing on the doctrine of the Trinity today lead in different directions, there does seem to be a near consensus that a more *relational* understanding of the Triune God has enormous potential for a re-thinking of, for instance,

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1 LaCugna 1991:1. The pathos of LaCugna's book is well portrayed when she writes: 'The doctrine of the Trinity is God's intimate communion with us through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. As such, it is an eminently practical doctrine with far-reaching consequences for Christian life. By connecting the doctrine of the Trinity with the concrete language and images of the Bible, creeds, and liturgy, the Christian doctrine of God can be reconnected with other areas of theology, as well as to ethics, spirituality, and the life of the church' (ix).

2 Cunningham 1998; Fiddes 2001. These more explicit references to Christian practice do not mean that other studies do not aim at the Christian life, but the explicit reference does point to the conscious attempt to relate the doctrine to the Christian life.

our views on anthropology, ecclesiology and ethics.<sup>3</sup> It is often argued that a relational understanding of the Trinity challenges the modern cult of the individual and helps us to understand ourselves not as isolated individuals, but as persons-in-relation. It furthermore seems to promise to relate identity and otherness in a way that embraces pluralism. The emphasis on relationality also fits well with certain postmodern sensibilities that shy away from fixed categories. According to many theologians, a relational view of the Trinity points to a more egalitarian ecclesiology in which relationships of domination are exposed and the church is drawn to a praxis of justice. As a result of the relationships in the Triune Life being self-giving and other-receiving relationships, it is also argued that a relational understanding serves as inspiration for lives of just generosity and hospitable love.

A so-called relational understanding of the Triune God thus seemingly holds promise to help us imagine or re-imagine God in such a way that we may view ourselves, others and creation differently. Given the challenges of the South(ern) African situation, it seems to point to matters of major importance. But, acknowledging this, the task still remains to clarify what such a relational understanding of the Triune God entails, and to reflect on how we relate such a more relational doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian (moral) life.

While these questions may seem to point in the direction of technicalities, it is of great importance to think about them in order to reflect on the moral life, not merely in terms of philosophical, psychological or sociological categories, but *theologically* – that means, among other things, with reference to the doctrine of God. The recent ecumenical reconsideration of the *filioque* controversy has to do with the recognition of a relational understanding of the Divine life.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I would like to affirm as well as qualify such a relational understanding of the Triune God by reflection on the notion of participation.

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3 Among the many studies in trinitarian theology that make some kind of plea for a stronger relational understanding of the Trinity, and not mentioned so far in this paper, see Moltmann 1981; Boff 1988; Gunton 1991; Jenson 1997; Jüngel 1976; Johnson 1992; Peters 1993; Torrance 1995; Volf 1998.

4 See, for instance, Peters 1993:63. See also Schwöbel 1995:4. In his contribution elsewhere in this volume, Bernd Oberdorfer also pointed to the fact that the question of the *filioque* is a question on the hermeneutics of trinitarian theology.

## 2. Imitation, imagination and participation

How do we relate the doctrine of the Trinity to Christian ethics? Or stated in more personal terms: how do we relate the Triune life to the Christian life? One possible answer to this question is to argue that the Triune life serves as *model* for the Christian life. Though there is some possible biblical warrant for such an approach,<sup>5</sup> it seems to be highly problematic to limit the moral life to such an ethic of *imitation*. Such an ethic of imitation fails to take the *discontinuity* between God's identity and our identities seriously. What is meant by 'person' or 'relation' within the Triune life cannot to be equated uncritically with what we understand about human personhood or relationality. Such a discontinuity points to the importance of a hermeneutical task that is marked by struggle, interpretation, ambiguity and embodiment. While an ethic of imitation does help us to find continuity between God's Triune life and our lives, its failure to deal adequately with discontinuity ultimately turns the moral life into a cold ideal or hard law. In the process it does not only fail to take seriously the complexities of being human, but also leaves insufficient room for grace and gratitude.

With regard to trinitarian theology, there is a real temptation to speculate about analogies between God's inner trinitarian life and our vision for personhood, the church and society. While such attempts are rhetorically powerful, they are nevertheless theologically suspect. These cautionary remarks do not mean that we are doomed to silence with regard to the continuities between God's identity and ours, or that we can disregard biblical texts that seem to speak the language of imitation. They do, however, point to the dangers of using the notion of imitation in an uncritical way when relating the doctrine of the Triune God to the Christian moral life.<sup>6</sup> As Christoph Schwöbel writes:

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5 For instance, 'You shall be holy as I am Holy' (Lev 11:44,45) and 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt 5:48).

6 In his article 'The Trinity Is Our Social Program' (1998), Miroslav Volf, in reflecting on a statement by Nicholas Federov, points to two equally unattractive options, the one consisting in seeking to imitate the Triune God with blatant disregard for the fact that we are not God and the other consisting in respecting our creaturely difference but failing our most proper human calling to be like God (Volf 1998:404, 405). Volf continues: 'Between "copying God in all respects" and "not copying God at all" lies the widely open space of human responsibility which consists in "copying God in some respects"' (Volf 1998:405). Volf acknowledges that there are limits to the correspondences between the Triune God and humans. He does not believe that the doctrine of the Trinity provides a social programme, but argues that it does contain the contours of the ultimate normative end to which all social programmes should strive



*The relationship between our views of God and our views on the order of personal and social relationships is complex. It would be theologically disastrous if one criticizes the projection of certain views of the divine nature on the order of human society for its alienating effects, and then proceeds by projecting a view of desirable human relationships on the divine being.*<sup>7</sup>

Given this critique of the notion of imitation, it can be argued that the notion of *imagination* is more adequate for making the link between the Triune life and the Christian moral life. The images, metaphors and stories of the Triune God's dealings with creation inspire Christian moral imaginations in a way that enables a different construal of the world. For some, such a link between imagination and ethics will be problematic – especially for those who espouse certain modernistic ethical theories. For them, the focus on imagination will seem to be subjective, arbitrary and non-rational. These modernistic moral theories, however, have been highly criticised in recent moral discourse.<sup>8</sup> The plea for the moral importance of the identity of the moral agent enables a broader understanding of ethics that creates the space to integrate imagination more fully into our understanding of the moral life. Such a plea for the moral importance of imagination has, among other things, the potential for a more constructive linking of godness and beauty, or ethics and aesthetics.<sup>9</sup>

While such a link between imagination and the moral life seems of paramount importance, imagination (understood in a certain way) does seem to have limitations as a moral category. It can lead to an individualistic, disembodied view of the moral life that separates imagination from Christian practices, or points to the importance of creative genius in such a way that the isolated, autonomous self of the Enlightenment remains intact. Imagination as a moral notion certainly has value as a critique of the subject-object dichotomy of the Enlightenment, but it needs qualification.

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(Volf 1998:406). Hence his use of the term 'social vision'. In his book *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (1998), Volf gives a more elaborate discussion of his plea that there is broken creaturely correspondence between the Triune God and humanity. See especially 191–220.

7 Schwöbel 1995:11.

8 See, for instance, MacIntyre 1981, Taylor 1989 and Hauerwas 1983.

9 For a reflection on the importance of imagination for Christian ethics, see my article 'Etiek as Optiek? Oor die rol van beelde en verbeelding in die Christelike morele lewe' (Vosloo 2004).

Given the limitations of certain constructions of the notions of imitation and imagination for providing a link between the Triune life and the Christian moral life, we can ask whether the notion of *participation* is not a more adequate notion. The Christian moral life is not merely about imitating or imagining differently, but about participation in the life of the Triune God. Therefore the Triune life is not merely a model or inspiration, but also the source that enables a Christian moral life. This does not deny the importance of imagination, but it does qualify the faithful Christian imagination as being a *participatory imagination* or, put differently, an *imaginative participation*. Such a view of the Christian moral imagination as a participatory imagination challenges the less helpful strands of modern ethical theory and holds the potential to give a more adequate account of the relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and the Christian moral life.

This notion of participation, however, needs further explanation and qualification. The rest of this contribution involves a conversation with two recent studies that explicitly make use of the notion of participation, as well as with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in whose work the notion of participation plays a more implicit, albeit important, role.

### 3. Challenging the relational consensus: David Cunningham

The so-called current 'relational consensus' in trinitarian theology has been challenged recently by David Cunningham. Cunningham is an American theologian and the author of an award-winning book entitled *Faithful Persuasion* (on the theme of rhetoric). In 1998 his already mentioned book *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* was published and in this book, as well as in a published article,<sup>10</sup> he challenges the so-called 'relational consensus' by proposing a move from relationality to participation.

Cunningham argues that it is difficult for us to imagine relationships without establishing the independent existence of two or more entities. This is problematic for the Three (a term that Cunningham favours for the Triune God). In God, argues Cunningham, there are not three 'somethings' who 'decide' to come into relation with one another, but the Three are wholly constituted by this relationality; they are 'relation without remainder,' or to quote Nicholas Lash, 'while we "have" relations, God is the relations that God has.'<sup>11</sup> The references by many contemporary theologians to relationality still recall for him an image

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10 Cunningham 1998.

11 Cunningham (note 612) 8.

of three individuals.<sup>12</sup> The problem for Cunningham is that, while these writers believe that the doctrine of the Trinity can act as a hedge between the individualism and privatisation of our modern/post-modern culture, it still employs language that is easily co-opted into that very individualistic framework. Therefore a relational ontology does not replace an ontology of substance, but simply makes it more palatable for an audience that has become somewhat jaded about sweeping metaphysical claims. It is clear that Cunningham is sympathetic to attempts like those of John Milbank to create a ‘theology without substance’ (to evoke an influential two-part article by Milbank) or Jean-Luc Marion to describe a ‘God without Being’ (to give the English title of one of Marion’s books). Cunningham joins this chorus by claiming that the doctrine of the Trinity is an overcoming of ontology. Instead of underwriting an ontology of substance, ‘the doctrine of the Trinity helps us to understand God not as being, but as harmonious difference, superabundant donation and self-abandoning love’.<sup>13</sup>

In his move away from the language of substance or ontology, Cunningham draws on the current revival of the category of virtue in moral philosophy and theological ethics. Cunningham construes virtue as naming the dispositions that God has by nature and in which we participate by grace. In the light of this, Cunningham calls attention to certain ‘trinitarian virtues’. These trinitarian virtues are characteristics of the triune God that are freely bestowed on us as gifts. In his book *These Three Are One*, Cunningham discusses three of these ‘trinitarian virtues’, which he calls polyphony, participation and particularity. He develops these notions at length and relates them to certain Christian practices.

I would like to call attention to the second of these trinitarian virtues, namely participation. As mentioned, Cunningham emphasises that the main point about the Three is not that they are related, but that they participate in one another to such a degree that any attempt to understand them as independent entities is undermined. For Cunningham, the implication of this is that ‘human beings are called to understand themselves, not as “individuals” who may (or may not) choose to enter in relationships, but rather as mutually indwelling and indwelt, and to such a degree that – echoing the indwelling of the Three – all pretensions to wholly independent existence are abolished.’<sup>14</sup> Cunningham wants us

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12 For Cunningham, this helps to explain the popularity of the notion of persons in relation. He criticises this notion (as developed by, for instance, Catherine LaCugna and Alan Torrance, as still being captive to a substantialist ontology.

13 Cunningham (note 612) 9.

14 Ibid. 166.

not simply to value 'relationality', but to think about the character of relationships. Hence the use of the notion of participation.

We need to note that Cunningham understands participation not in the sense of taking part in something, but in the sense of taking part in someone (as in the phrase 'participating in the sufferings of another'). This emphasises something of the intimacy that the term wants to portray. Therefore, he links the word participation to notions such as fellowship and communion (the Greek word *koinonia*).<sup>15</sup> It is about mutual indwelling in which the lines between 'I' and 'you' are blurred, and subject and object are understood as rhetorical categories (denoting the whence and whereof) of communication.

Cunningham's thoughts on participation lead him to discuss a term often used in trinitarian theology, namely the patristic notion of *perichoresis*.<sup>16</sup> This term was originally used to describe the reciprocal participation of the two natures of Christ. The 6th century writer called Pseudo-Cyril was probably the first to apply this term to the mutual participation within the Trinity. John of Damascus also used this notion in the 8th century. This term adopted and developed the statement of Jesus in John 14:11: 'Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me'. The term *perichoresis* is difficult to translate but includes connotations such as *interpenetration* or *co-inherence*. It is about the mutual indwelling of the Three, about permeation without confusion. For Cunningham, this notion of *perichoresis* is a praiseworthy attempt to prevent the isolation and separation of the Three. He does wonder, though, whether this rich notion would need to play such a prominent role if we were to begin with a less individualistic portrait of the Three in the first place.

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15 It can be mentioned that while the notions of participation and communion (*koinonia*) are often used interchangeably, it is worthwhile to remember some historical distinctions in this regard. In his book *Being as Communion*, the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas asks, with reference to Origen, how participation differs from communion. Zizioulas notes that while the terms participation and communion at first sight seem to be interchangeable in the Greek Fathers, they did make a clear and deliberate distinction. Participation is used for creatures in relation with God and never for God in relationship to creatures. See *Being as Communion* (1997:94).

16 Most notably this notion of *perichoresis* is reflected on in the work of Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, Colin Gunton, Catherine LaCugna, Elizabeth Johnson, Eberhard Jüngel and Miroslav Volf. See also the influential discussion of the term by G L Prestige in his book *God in Patristic Thought* (1952:282–301).

The content and pathos of Cunningham's argument can be summarised by noting his point that

*the notion of a pure, isolated 'individual' is a highly disputable human construction. In God, there are no individuals; the Three dwell in the other so completely that we cannot divide them ... And so we too are called to live lives of mutual participation, in which our relationships is not something we 'have'. but [which] are what constitutes us as Human beings.<sup>17</sup>*

Cunningham calls for a human paralleling of the trinitarian virtue of participation.

Cunningham's challenge to abstract relational language with regard to the triune God is in my view very important. The notion of participation does point in the direction of a stronger description of the character of the relations within God. His reflection on the notion of participation does, however, raise a few important questions.

Reading Cunningham, one hears clearly the critique against the modern cult of the individual in his emphasis on the importance of dwelling in, and being indwelt by the lives of others. These attempts are praiseworthy, but one can ask whether the total move away from substantialist categories – while seemingly powerful for challenging the modern self – does not leave us without resources to challenge the so-called postmodern 'self'. Does such a move away from absolute substance not end in a new absolute, namely that of absolute relation – one which is vulnerable to the same totalitarian tendencies?

As mentioned above, Cunningham calls for a paralleling of the trinitarian virtue of participation. While he admits that our status as creatures rules out any perfect imaging of God's internal participation and that we must not underestimate the power of the Spirit that works in us to do infinitely more than we can imagine, he does not develop this more fully. I think that Paul Fiddes's critical remark is to the point when he writes that Cunningham 'deals with "participation" almost entirely as a parallel between the participation that occurs within God's own communion and that within human society; he does not dwell on our human participation *in God*'.<sup>18</sup> Does not the notion of participation require a stronger pneumatological description than the one that Cunningham supplies?

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17 Cunningham (note 612) 169.

18 Fiddes 2001:39.

4. Participation and pastoral experience: Paul Fiddes

With these remarks and questions in mind, we can turn to Paul Fiddes as our second conversation partner. He is a theologian from Oxford and his books include *The Creative Suffering of God* (1988) and *The Promised End* (2000).<sup>19</sup> Like Cunningham, Fiddes uses participation as a central notion in the argument of his book *Participating in God: a Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (2001). Fiddes describes the aim of this book as ‘to begin to shift our way of thinking away from the “observational” which is characteristic of the split between subject and object in our Western culture, and to introduce the aspect of “participation” in what is real’.<sup>20</sup>

Fiddes is also highly critical of the individualistic and privatised self, but seems to be more sensitive than most scholars about taking certain pastoral questions into consideration in his discussion of the relationship between the individual and the community. He emphasises the need to ‘create a balance the person and the personage, between self-integrity and openness to others, between independence and dependence, and between diversity and unity’.<sup>21</sup> What then, he asks, is the place of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (which concerns a personal God that lives in relationships) in the face of these pastoral questions?

In his reflection on this question, Fiddes also rejects the strategy that urges mere imitation of the Triune God. Such a rhetorical appeal is not altogether futile for Fiddes, and he notes that he also aims at a type of ‘trinitarian modelling’. He continues, however, by commenting that an imitation of God – as a concept of God to be implemented – is not a sufficient pastoral theology and that he is aiming to complement the imitation of God with a thoroughgoing attempt to speak of participation in God as pastoral experience.<sup>22</sup>

This, argues Fiddes, has implications for the language we use about God in the sense that it cannot be observational language that describes God from the standpoint of an external perceiver. This emphasis does not point to an existentialist approach that merely appeals to experience. Instead, it implies that, ‘There is a way forward “into God”, which recognises both the divine mystery and the brokenness of human words

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19 Fiddes *The Creative Suffering of God* (1988); *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (2000). Other books by Fiddes include *Past Event and Present Salvation* (1989) and *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (1991).

20 Fiddes (note 620) 12. In his book *The Promised End* (2000), Fiddes also uses the notion of (trinitarian) participation as a key category in his argument. See, for instance, 204–206; 262–288.

21 Fiddes (note 620) 28.

22 *Ibid.* 29.

in the face of God. If God has taken the initiative in self-disclosure, and we have experienced the gift of God's self-unveiling in our experience, then we are required to speak both to and about the Giver'.<sup>23</sup>

Such personal language remains metaphorical and analogical, 'but it has the capacity to be a language of participation, pointing to engagement in God and drawing us into such involvement'.<sup>24</sup> The language of participation leads Fiddes to embrace Barth's language of event with regard to the being of God, but he criticises Barth's notion of 'modes of being' (the term that Barth prefers to the 'persons' of the Trinity). He sees this as contrary to Barth's own perception of the dynamic nature of God. Fiddes prefers to speak of 'movements of relationship' (or better: 'movements or relationships subsisting in one event'). This is for him not the language of spectator but of participant.

What seems to me to be important in Fiddes's discussion is his bringing together a way of understanding the nature of being (ontology) with a way of knowing (epistemology) in a manner that understands the being of God as event and relationship, but only through an epistemology of participation. He writes: 'Only by bringing together being as relation, and knowing as participation, will we begin to overcome the view of the human subject stemming from the Enlightenment, in which observation is the basic paradigm of knowing.'<sup>25</sup>

It is not surprising that Fiddes also discusses the notion of *perichoresis* as a concept that emphasises that the language of the Trinity is not a language of observation but of participation. In his discussion of the notion, Fiddes refers to the two Latin terms that were used to translate the Greek term. *Circuminsessio* (from *circum-in-sedere*, to sit around) means that one person is contained in the other, literally 'seated' in another. This term stressed a state of being and was preferred by Aquinas. The second term, *circumincessio* (*circum-incedere*, to move around), is a more active word that evokes a state of doing and captures a sense of movement. This second aspect points to a metaphor that was occasionally applied to *perichoresis* in the Middle Ages, namely that of the divine dance. While the term *perichoresis* does not derive from 'dance around' (*perichoreuo*), it does illustrate the dynamic sense of the term.

This idea of *perichoresis* as divine dance is valuable for Fiddes, because it fits his understanding of the divine persons as movements of relationship. It is not so much about the dancers as about the pattern of the dance itself. Fiddes admits that this metaphor of the dance did not

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23 Ibid. 30.

24 Ibid. 38.

25 Ibid.



originally take hold in Christian imaginations as a metaphor for the inner participation of the Triune God, but that it did later become a widespread image for the participation of all created beings in God. One reason the metaphor of dance was not used frequently with regard to the divine life relates to the neoplatonic tendency to avoid movement in God. Yet this idea of a God in movement is exactly the dynamic image of God that Fiddes wants to commend for a pastoral theology. Dance, he writes, 'implies a God in movement, even a God in the process of change, rather than a God whose intellectual love simply moves other things and people by their contemplation of it'.<sup>26</sup> This challenges the image of the dominating God whose power lies in immobility and being secure from being affected by the changing world.

Fiddes develops the notion of participation in God further with regard to questions dealing with power, prayer, suffering, forgiveness

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26 Fiddes (note 620) 74. Fiddes gives an interesting discussion of how this metaphor of the divine dance was developed differently in the East and the West (see especially 75–81). In the East it was like a progressive dance (out from the Father and back in to the Father). Salvation is viewed as divinisation (*theosis*). The danger of this approach is that the Father can be viewed as the dominating partner, subordinating the other dancers, and thus sanctioning hierarchies of power. In the West the metaphor of dance is used more in the sense of a circle dance. The origin of the Trinity is not in the Father, but in the one nature of God. This holds the danger that the one nature becomes a fourth factor somehow behind the three persons, although the best theologians understood the one nature as nothing other than a *perichoresis* of persons. This stresses the equality, mutuality and reciprocity of the Three. This picture of symmetrical fellowship is capped by the idea in the West that the Spirit is the bond of love between the other two persons. Thus the notion of the *filioque* – that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This is attractive, especially to those who fear that the idea of the monarchy of the Father does not serve sufficiently the agenda of the liberation of people from oppression and inequality. The danger of the Western notion of the circle dance is that it can become a closed circle, a self-sufficient dance. For Fiddes, the progressive dance of the East makes *ousia* a mystery; while the circle dance can make the distinctions of the triune relations a mystery within God's inner life. In addition Fiddes avers that Augustine veers in this direction with his notion of the external actions as indistinguishable and inseparable. He adds that the stress on engagement (participation) helps us to see the best of the insights of the East and the West. There are mutuality and reciprocity in God, yet we do not observe these relationships, but are drawn to share in the movements of the divine dance. The Eastern insight that the Father is the origin or source (*arche*) of the Son and the Spirit makes clear that the dance is not a swirling vortex of arbitrary currents. The dance may be a complex one, yet it has a pattern. There is direction to its flow (which is like the movements to and from an ultimate source).



and the threat of death. In an important chapter on the Spirit of God, Fiddes refers to the images of the Spirit as 'wind', 'breath' and 'fire' as being images that open up our sense of God. These images remind us of the reality that enables us not only to talk about God, but also to participate in God. The Spirit is therefore the 'opener' or the 'disturber'.<sup>27</sup> Fiddes also affirms Richard of St Victor's notion of 'the Third' as necessary for love to be actualised. The Holy Spirit is the Third person who opens up relationships, 'who makes us look more deeply at ourselves, at others and the society around us'.<sup>28</sup> Fiddes concludes his study with a chapter on the incarnate God and the sacramental life, with the summarising remark that the openness to the presence of God 'can be felt like the invitation to a dance, but sometimes like the raw edges of a wound'. 'This,' he writes, 'is participation in God. This is theology.'<sup>29</sup>

This short discussion on Fiddes's use of the notion of participation calls for a few additional remarks and raises some questions. Fiddes's use of 'persons as relations' raises the same questions we asked with regard to Cunningham's total move away from substance to relation. Fiddes shares Cunningham's view that the 'persons' (*hypostases*) are the relations (he sees himself as following the view of the Cappadocian Fathers in the Eastern Church, who seem to see the being of God as communion or fellowship). There are therefore no persons at the end of the relations, but the 'persons' are simply the relations.

What seems to me extremely valuable in Fiddes's discussion is his challenge to the subject-object dichotomy of the Enlightenment through his epistemology of participation. There is not participation merely in God, but also through the Spirit. Human beings participate in the movements of relationship within God. This challenges the language of the spectator or observer and has important potential for affirming the moral importance of worship and Christian practices such as baptism and the Eucharist.

While it would probably be unjust to say that Fiddes falls victim to a type of pantheism in his discussion of our participation in God, we certainly can ask the question whether the notion of participating in God does not need an even stronger Christological focus than Fiddes

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27 In his book *The Promised End*, Fiddes also uses the image of the Spirit as the opener. He writes: 'The movement of spirit-ness can be recognized as a continual opening up the hidden depths of relationship between the Father and Son, a deepening and diversifying of communion that makes it apt to "appropriate" fellowship to the Spirit, while not reserving the creating of fellowship entirely to this relation' (2000:270).

28 Fiddes (note 620) 267.

29 Ibid. 302.

reveals in his study.<sup>30</sup> It is in my view very important that the notion of participation is not merely a participation in God in some esoteric way, but that because of a certain understanding of Christ, it is therefore a participation in reality – it is a participation in life, it is being drawn into life.

## 5. Participation in Christ: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Towards the end of his book *God the Spirit*, the German theologian Michael Welker describes the Spirit as the enabler that enables intimacy with God, free self-withdrawal, participation in God's glory and the enjoyment of eternal life. Welker makes the important remark that, although the Spirit draws us into the overwhelming fullness of the presence of God, 'this intimacy is not to be confused with an ineffable, obscure mystical relationship whose intensity condemns us to say nothing, or whose hypercomplexity leads to diffusion or dissolution of determinate experience'.<sup>31</sup> This remark serves in my view as an important reminder that the description of the Christian life as participation through the Spirit is subject to dissolution in a hazy mysticism that dislocates the Christian moral life from the economy of salvation. Or, put differently: our participation in God is a participation *in Christ* and through the Spirit.

The notion of participation in Christ plays an important role in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his second Berlin dissertation *Act and Being*, he writes about 'being in Christ'.<sup>32</sup> In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer uses the notion of participation frequently. In the section on *Christ, Reality and the Good*, Bonhoeffer writes, for instance: 'The question of good becomes the participation in the divine reality which is revealed in Christ.'<sup>33</sup> A few pages further we read: 'In Christ we are offered the possibility to partake in the reality of God and the reality of the world, but not in the one without the other.'<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer's use of participation in Christ offers a few important perspectives that must be kept in mind if we are to use the notion of participation with regard to the Christian moral life.

Participation in reality is, as seen from Bonhoeffer's remarks quoted above, a participation in the reality of God *and* the reality of the world. This makes it clear that Christian moral life is not an esoteric life, but an earthly life that asks for an earthly holiness. Our participating in

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30 It needs to be said that Fiddes's emphasis in the last chapter of his book on bodies, the body of Christ, and the Eucharist points away from some kind of esoteric participation in God that is separated from 'reality'.

31 Welker 1994:331.

32 Bonhoeffer 1996. See especially 150–161.

33 Bonhoeffer 2015:163.

34 Ibid. 167.

the reality of God in Christ has everything to do with *this* earth and *this* life. In the prison letter of 5 December 1943, Bonhoeffer remarks: 'My thought and feelings seem to be getting more and more like those of the Old Testament ... it is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one may believe in the resurrection and the new world.'<sup>35</sup> And later on he again talks talk of the 'earthly beauty' as 'the only kind of beauty that really appeals to me'.<sup>36</sup>

As participation in Christ, the Christian life is furthermore a sharing in the suffering of Christ. It testifies to, in the words of Bonhoeffer's famous paragraph, 'a view from below: We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer'.<sup>37</sup>

These few cursory remarks on Bonhoeffer's use of the notion of participation serve in my view as a helpful reminder and an important challenge not to use the notion of participation in any vague esoteric sense that separates it from notions like discipleship and responsibility. It can be argued that Bonhoeffer's Christological description of the moral life needs a clearer trinitarian context,<sup>38</sup> but his (in a way understandable) Christological focus serves as reminder to describe the moral life not merely as participation through the Spirit, but indeed as participation *in Christ* and through the Spirit.<sup>39</sup>

## 6. The participatory imagination and the Christian moral life

Within South African society there is evidence of a growing social apathy (a type of 'apart-icipation'). This social apathy results from and contributes to the so-called crisis of morality in our society. Such a social apathy has many sources, but one of them is certainly related to the increasing dominance of the view of the self as an isolated individual.

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35 Bonhoeffer 1953:157.

36 Ibid. 239.

37 Ibid. 17.

38 As argued by Charles Marsh in his book *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1994).

39 While there may be enough reason to speak of participation *in Christ* and *through* the Spirit, it is certainly also possible to follow the doxological pattern of St Basil the Great in his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* and speak of participation *in* the glory of the Father, *through* (*dia*) the Son *in* (*en*) the Spirit. For a very interesting discussion of this doxological pattern, see Geoffrey Wainwright's article 'Trinitarian Worship' (1992). The point is, however, that it is important to hold to a Christological *and* a pneumatological focus when using the notion of participation as a way to describe relations in God and our participation in that participation.

## *The Trinity and Participation*

This understanding of human personhood needs to be challenged in a responsible way if we are to face moral problems seriously. In my view, a re-imagining of God in which we see God not as isolated individuals or as a lonely monarch can inspire our imaginations to view ourselves, others and creation differently. This does not serve merely as a model or a vision, but in Christ and through the Spirit we are enabled to participate in the self-giving and other-receiving love of the Triune God. This serves as a source for us to live lives of generosity, hospitality, responsibility and joy.



## The Trinity and Otherness

Robert Vosloo

### 1. Against enclosed identity and romanticised otherness

One of the challenges facing Christians and churches in South Africa is the reflection on, and the embodiment of, a Christian ethic of hospitality. Such an ethic, which draws on the rich biblical accounts of hospitality, has the potential, among other things, to critique certain inadequate ways of relating identity and otherness. A Christian ethic of hospitality challenges the notion of an *enclosed identity* in which the aim is to protect my/our identity by insulating me or us from what is different and other. It thus serves as a reminder not to emphasise identity in such a way that it becomes sectarian and parochial, in short, totalitarian. The twentieth century, including our recent South African past, can be seen as a dreadful monument to the dangers of such a mindset of enclosed identity.

A Christian ethic of hospitality, furthermore, is not to be equated uncritically with a *liberal, romantic openness towards otherness*. Within such a framework, the other is viewed as an abstract ideal or serves to satisfy our aesthetic appetite for strangeness. Such a romanticised notion of otherness fails to take the concrete identity of the other seriously. While there is the pretence of openness, the self in fact insulates him- or herself from the other and otherness. Hence, identity also becomes totalitarian. It can also be argued that such a view is not merely a failure to take the identity of the other seriously, but also a failure to deal adequately with the identity of the moral self. To act morally, according to modernistic moral theories, implies that the moral person ignores, or alienates, him- or herself from his/her narrative or identity in order to make an 'objective', rational moral judgement. The critique of such modernistic moral theories is well known. The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre offers a powerful analysis of why the Enlightenment project of grounding morality in rationality qua rationality had to fail,<sup>1</sup> while another moral philosopher, Charles

1 See especially his widely influential book, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1984). MacIntyre puts his critique against the Enlightenment philosophers this way: '(T)hey indeed attempt to find a rational basis for their moral beliefs in a particular understanding of human nature, while inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a conception

Taylor, calls our attention to what he, in his inquiry into the sources of modern selfhood, calls inescapable frameworks.<sup>2</sup> The Theologian Stanley Hauerwas also critiques modernistic ethical and political theories for their attempt to detach morality from particularity.<sup>3</sup>

While all may not agree with the constructive positions of scholars such as MacIntyre, Taylor and Hauerwas, their critique of what can be called the 'identity of non-identity' of modern ethical and political theories seems to be of paramount importance. For an ethic of hospitality, this implies that it is a false option to 'ignore' identity in modernistic fashion, because doing so leads to a reduction of morality that fails to take notions such as character, virtue, passions, moral exemplars, practices, community and tradition seriously.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted, however, that a plea for an acknowledgement of identity can easily become a way of avoiding the challenges facing our cultural situation. One often hears, for instance, in political and church discourse, the plea for identity made in such a way that the suspicion arises that it is merely masked conservatism linked with the inability to

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of human nature on the other hand which had been expressly designed to be discrepant with each other ... They inherited incoherent fragments of a once coherent scheme of thought and action and, since they did not recognize their own peculiar historical and cultural situation, they could not recognize the impossible and quixotic character of their self-appointed task' (55).

- 2 See his *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989). In this monumental work Taylor writes: 'Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions or reactions ... To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame of horizon within which I can try to determine what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose' (26, 27).
- 3 See Taylor 1989. In this monumental work Taylor writes: 'Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions or reactions ... To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame of horizon within which I can try to determine what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose' (26, 27).
- 4 This statement that the modern project ignored identity needs to be qualified. In his book *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (1997) sociologist Zygmunt Bauman makes the insightful comment that the 'modern project promised to free the individual from inherited identity. Yet it did not take a stand against identity as such, against having an identity, even a solid, resilient and immutable identity. It only transformed the identity from the matter of ascription into the achievement thus making it an individual task and the individual's responsibility' (20).



face change. What is needed is not an emphasis on identity as such, nor on the alienation from identity, but an emphasis on a *certain kind of identity* – an identity open to the other and otherness.

One of the challenges facing us, then, is the challenge of facing the other and otherness – facing the stranger, strangeness, and even estrangement. Although the facing of the other, or openness towards the other and otherness, is not necessarily equivalent to a Christian ethic of hospitality, such a facing and openness are nevertheless constitutive of hospitality. Hospitality is the welcoming of the other in his or her otherness.

The plea for such openness towards the other and otherness is well known in philosophical and theological discourse. The work of, among others, the philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur and the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer immediately comes to mind.<sup>5</sup> An

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5 Throughout his work, and especially in his major works *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1969) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* ((1981), Levinas develops the idea of ethics as first philosophy in which the responsibility for the other is primary. In the process he critiques what is, in his view, the Western philosophical tradition's tendency to grant precedence to ontology. According to Levinas, this resulted in what he calls ego-logy. Ethics is for Levinas the critique against the cognitive enterprise of the ego to reduce all otherness to itself. The ethical is therefore the locus of what Levinas calls exteriority. Exteriority names that which cannot be reduced to sameness. The ethical relation is one in which I encounter the face of the Other. The face of the Other is a revelation, or epiphany, that summons us to responsibility. The face of the other resists totalisation. It cannot be contained: 'The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp' (*Totality and Infinity*, 197). The face has a certain vulnerability or nudity, and as such it invites violence. But the face of the Other is also my Sinai – prohibiting murder and violence. The face of the Other 'is the primordial expression, is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder' (*Totality and Infinity*, 199). Although Levinas does not use the word hospitality often in a major work like *Totality and Infinity*, it can rightfully be called a treatise on hospitality. For the use of the notion of hospitality in reference to Levinas' work, see Derrida 1999:21 and Ford 1999:30–44. Levinas is indeed an important conversation partner in the rethinking of an ethic of hospitality.

Another philosopher who offers an insightful and nuanced engagement with the dialectic of identity and otherness is Paul Ricoeur. In his reworking of his 1986 Gifford Lectures, entitled *Oneself as Another* (1992), he deals with the question of selfhood and personal identity. Ricoeur distinguishes between two major meanings of identity, derived from the Latin, namely *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity. *Idem*-identity is synonymous to sameness. This is opposed to the idea of selfhood as *ipse*-identity. *Ipse*-identity involves the dialectic of self and other than self (otherness). For Ricoeur, otherness is constitutive of selfhood as

engagement with the thought of Levinas, Ricoeur and Bonhoeffer invite us to break free from the limitations of enclosed identity and romanticised otherness. While a thorough, albeit critical, engagement with their work provides wonderful resources for the rethinking of an ethic of hospitality, the focus of this article is more on the question of whether an adequate *theological* analysis of hospitality does not also require a more thorough engagement with trinitarian theology. And further, can a trinitarian focus help us to rethink the relationship between identity and otherness – which is of such crucial importance for an ethic of hospitality – in faithful and creative ways?

## 2. The promise and problems of trinitarian theology

### 2.1 A renewed interest

Over the last few years, we have witnessed what can be called a revival or renaissance in trinitarian theology. That we can speak of a revival in trinitarian theology implies that the doctrine has been neglected for some time. We read in some studies on the doctrine of God in paragraph headings about ‘the defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity’ (LaCugna),<sup>6</sup> ‘the exile of

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such. As the title *Oneself as Another* suggests, the selfhood of oneself implies otherness in such a degree that oneself cannot be thought of without the other. The self can never be separated from its other. For Ricoeur, the self does not dissolve into the other, but the autonomy of the self is tightly bound up with solicitude for one’s neighbour and with justice for each individual. Ricoeur fears Levinas risks eclipsing the need for self-esteem as an integral part of other-orientated responsibility. Ricoeur therefore quotes with affirmation in a footnote from Georges Bernanos’s *Diary of a Country Priest*, ‘It is easier than one thinks to hate oneself. Grace means forgetting oneself. But if all pride were dead in us, the grace of graces would be to love oneself humbly, as one would any of the suffering members of Jesus Christ’ (24).

The French writer Georges Bernanos was, interestingly, also an influence on the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. See Bethge 1970:103, 104. The theme of otherness is, of course, part and parcel of the life and thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dirkie Smit has given a helpful overview of ‘the Other’ in the thought of Bonhoeffer. See Smit 1995. Bonhoeffer is well known for his remarks on Jesus Christ as ‘the man for others’ and the church as ‘the church for others.’ The theme of otherness is dominant also in his earlier writings. As far back as his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study on the Sociology of the Church* (1998), he reflects on the relation of the self and the other in his discussion of the Christian concept of person and community.

6 LaCugna 1991:19.

the Trinity' (Forte),<sup>7</sup> or 'the marginalization of the Trinity' (Placher);<sup>8</sup> and a report of a study commission of the British Council of Churches on trinitarian doctrine (published in 1989) is entitled *The Forgotten Trinity*. However, given the renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity, it seems possible to confirm David Cunningham's observation: 'Indeed, so prevalent have such studies become that the phenomenon looks not so much like a renaissance as a bandwagon.'<sup>9</sup>

What makes this renewed interest in trinitarian theology remarkable is that it seems to cut across confessional boundaries. It is therefore possible to speak with Geoffrey Wainwright of an *ecumenical* rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth noting that the three theologians who are often described as the progenitors of trinitarian theology in the twentieth century, namely Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and Vladimir Lossky, come from the Protestant, the Catholic and the Orthodox traditions respectively.

Barth's doctrine of the Trinity in *Church Dogmatics 1/1* (1932) is a powerful treatise on the identity of the Christian God. Rahner's influential essay in *Mysterium Salutis* (1967; published later in English as *The Trinity*) was an attempt to redirect trinitarian theology by criticising the tendency to separate the treatise 'On the One God' (*De Deo Uno*) from the treatise 'On the Triune God' (*De Deo Trino*). Lossky's work (see especially *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*) is also influential for setting the dialogue between Eastern and Western theology in trinitarian terms. Following Barth, Rahner and Lossky, some of the most renowned theologians of the twentieth century have written studies on the doctrine of the Trinity and reference to the doctrine is central in some significant books dealing, for instance, with spirituality, sacraments, sexuality, the church and personhood.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Forte 1989:3.

8 Placher 1996:164.

9 Cunningham 1998:19.

10 See Wainwright 1998. Wainwright gives a very helpful overview of the rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity and relates this in an interesting way to conversations within the ecumenical movement.

11 Influenced by Barth, Eberhard Jungel published *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming* (1976). Jürgen Moltmann's *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (1993) is a powerful critique of Barth and Rahner and an attempt to develop a social doctrine of the Trinity. Leonardo Boff's *Trinity and Society* (1988), sees the doctrine of the Trinity as a model for society that serves the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. An important trinitarian theologian writing in English today is Robert Jenson. The influence of Barth on Jenson is very strong, but he tries to move beyond Barth. See especially his book, *The Triune Identity*

## 2.2 Reasons for the revival of trinitarian theology

There are certainly many possible reasons for the revival of trinitarian theology. One has to do with ecumenical dialogue. The encounter with the theology and liturgy of Eastern Orthodoxy in an ecumenical context, while initially focusing almost exclusively on the filioque, led to, among other things, a reappraisal of the insights of the Cappadocians into a more relational ontology of personhood.<sup>12</sup> It is often said that Western trinitarian theology is merely a footnote to Augustine's brilliant reflections on the doctrine of the Trinity in his *De Trinitate*. Many more recent studies are more critical of Augustine's so-called psychological view of the Trinity. Western theologians have become more open to the Eastern critique and have even rediscovered some of the relational sources within the Western

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(1982), as well as his *Systematic Theology Vol 1: The Triune God* (1997) and *Systematic Theology Vol 2: The Works of God* (1999). For a thorough engagement of prominent scholars with the work of Jenson, see Gunton *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert Jenson* (2000). One of the most informative discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity is Wolfhart Pannenberg's discussion in his *Systematic Theology, Vol 1* (1999). Pannenberg develops a qualified social notion of the Trinity. There is also renewed interest in the trinitarian theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. See the various volumes of his *Theo-Drama* (1988–1992). Other Roman Catholic studies include Walter Kasper's *The God of Jesus Christ* (1983) and William Hill's *The Three-Personed God* (1982), as well as Bruno Forte's *The Trinity as History*. One of the important Catholic studies that follows Rahner, is Catherine Mowry LaCugna's *God For Us: The Trinity in Christian Life*. The work of Elizabeth Johnson can also be mentioned. See, for instance, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse* (1993), as well as her article entitled 'To Let the Symbol Sing Again' (1997). The Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas's book *Being As Communion* (1997) has also been very influential. The English Reformed theologian Colin Gunton has written extensively on trinitarian theology. See for instance, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (1991), *The One, the Three, and the Many* (1993) and *The Triune Creator* (1998). For a valuable collection of essays, see Christoph Schwöbel (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology Today* (1995). For another helpful discussion, see the chapter 'The Triune God' in Daniel Migliore's book *Faith seeking Understanding* (1991). Some other important studies include: Ted Peters *GOD as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (1993); Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion* (1996); Thomas Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (1995); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (1998); Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostle's Creed* (1992); David Cunningham, *These Three Are One* (1999) and Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God* (2001).

12 See Schwöbel 1995:3–4.

tradition such as, for instance, Augustine's own use of the model of the love relationship or the later work of Richard of St Victor.<sup>13</sup>

A further impetus for the revival of trinitarian theology has to do with Christian–Jewish dialogue. In this regard, a discussion (held in 1978) can be recalled between the Jewish theologian Pinchas Lapide and the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann on one of the most difficult problems that seemingly divides Jews and Christians, namely Jewish monotheism and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>14</sup> More recently, other theologians have struggled with the statement that Yahweh is the triune God. This led to some fruitful conversations that, among other things, challenge Christian theologians to make clearer their understanding of the doctrine of the triune God and the way that this understanding relates to the Jewish understanding of the God of Israel.<sup>15</sup> These ecumenical conversations – together, we may add, with the upsurge of Pentecostalism and its views on the Spirit – have led to a re-engagement with trinitarian theology as something at the heart of Christian discourse.

Another possible reason for the renewed interest in trinitarian theology has to do with the so-called death of theism. Some feel that the atheistic critique of philosophical theism (the belief in the existence of a supreme and beneficent being) opens new constructive possibilities for a trinitarian understanding of God. Elizabeth Johnson, for instance, argues that it is a good thing that the God of classical theism has come under such severe attack from Feuerbach, Marx and Freud as well as from Barth, Bonhoeffer and liberation and feminist theologians. While these various assaults may be viewed as attacks on faith, Johnson thinks, with Bonhoeffer, that they are 'a providential clearing of the deck so that precisely the relational Christian God can be rediscovered'.<sup>16</sup>

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13 For a thorough study on the relational model in the work of Richard of St Victor, see Nico ten Bok 1996.

14 Lapide & Moltmann 1981.

15 See also Soulen (1999), Logister (2000) and Bruce Marshall (2000). For some very important and challenging perspectives in this regard, see also the articles of Peter Ochs, 'The God of Jews and Christians', David Ellenson 'A Jewish View of the Christian God: Some Cautionary and Hopeful Remarks' and David Tracy, 'God as Trinitarian: A Christian Response to Peter Ochs'.

16 Johnson 1997:302. On the relationship between the attack on theism and the revival of trinitarian theology, see also Schwöbel's editorial introduction to *Trinitarian Theology Today*. In the same book Ingolf Dalferth writes in his essay: 'Anti-theism, then, i.e. the rejection of Enlightenment theism, its consequences and its antithesis (atheism), has been one of the major motifs for trinitarian theology today' (1995:149). It seems as if there is a growing consensus that Christian theology must be trinitarian in character to move beyond the barren

A third reason relates more directly to our concerns in this essay. It has to do with identity, pluralism and otherness. It seems to be the case that a trinitarian focus holds the promise of a more adequate rethinking of the relation between the one and the many, sameness and difference, identity and otherness. For instance, David Cunningham writes: 'The doctrine of the Trinity calls into question our assumption that the categories of oneness and difference are incommensurable, incompatible, or even necessarily in tension with one another. The doctrine is thus an implicit critique of the dominant philosophical tradition of the West, in which "otherness" is associated primarily with fragmentation and revolt.'<sup>17</sup> In a collection of essays *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* we also read in the Introduction: '(T)he doctrine of the Trinity, with its dual emphasis on one-ness and three-ness as equally ultimate, contains unexpected and hitherto unexplored resources for dealing with the problems, and possibilities, of contemporary pluralism.'<sup>18</sup> These remarks are in some way representative of the widespread assumption in trinitarian theology that the doctrine of the Trinity holds immense potential for dealing with the challenges of otherness and pluralism. While there is by no means consensus on how this is the case, it does seem as though there is a growing emphasis on the promise of a trinitarian focus for a clearer conceptualisation of the relation between identity and otherness, sameness and difference, the self and the other.

If we can state that there is pluralism in God, then it seems that our view of God offers a resource to embrace pluralism. Hence the great attraction of thinking in social categories about the Trinity. While Barth and Rahner can be described as mono-personal trinitarians, theologians such as Moltmann, Boff, Pannenberg, Johnson and others embrace in different ways some form of social trinitarianism.<sup>19</sup> This often implies a

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alternatives of theism and atheism. See also Dietrich Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology* (1997). Ritschl points to the fact that 'classical theism allows no freedom – it requires the sacrifice either of our own humanity or of belief in God. The biblical understanding of God ... takes quite different courses from classical theism' (140).

17 Cunningham 1999:8.

18 Vanhoozer 1996:x.

19 In *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Moltmann critiques Barth and Rahner for opting to protect the sovereignty of God by speaking respectively of the Trinity as 'three modes of Being' and 'three modes of subsistence' of the One God. Moltmann feels this leaves the door open too wide for monarchianism. Hence he develops a social doctrine of the Trinity in which 'God is a community of Father, Son and Spirit, whose unity is constituted by mutual indwelling and reciprocal interpenetration' (viii). This makes it possible to view the divine sociality not as a single ruler, but as a democratic community, not in the lordship of the man over the

critique of Augustine's psychological or mental doctrine of the Trinity and a revisiting of the thought of Eastern theology (and especially the Cappadocians) or, remaining in the West, the more relational trinitarian theology of Richard of St Victor. Hence the popularity of the description of the triune God as persons-in-relation, or the use of the patristic notion of *perichoresis* to describe the inter-trinitarian life of God. Whether we adhere to a strong social doctrine or (like Barth) speak of modes of being or (like Rahner) of modes of subsistence, it is nonetheless clear that the doctrine of the Trinity at least holds the promise of locating plurality not merely within the world or the church, but within the life of the Godhead.

Before we discuss these issues more fully, it seems clear that trinitarian theology at least holds the promise of dealing faithfully and creatively with the challenge of pluralism and otherness. It points to the possibility of a 'relational ontology' that can challenge modern notions of personhood.

Within a culture of pluralism, it is also the case that trinitarian theology becomes important to *identify* the Christian God. As Robert Jenson writes:

*In the foreseeable future the life of the Western world will be very like that of the declining Mediterranean antiquity, in which trinitarian language was first created presenting a different divine offering at every street corner. For Christian discourse to be intelligible, we shall have to accept our place as one item of this pluralism and make clear – first and principally to ourselves – which God we mean, before we venture on his reality or characteristics. Therefore the Western Church must now either renew its trinitarian consciousness or experience increasing impotence and confusion.<sup>20</sup>*

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woman but in their equal mutuality, not in their ecclesial hierarchy but in a fellowship church. For one of the many discussions of Moltmann's doctrine of the Trinity, see Richard Bauckham, 'Jürgen Moltmann's *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God and the Question of Pluralism*' (1996). In his book *Trinity and Society* (1988), Leonardo Boff, like Moltmann, uses 'social language'. The title of the introduction makes this clear: 'From the solitude of One to the Communion of Three.' If God were mere unity, there would be solitude. If God were two, there would be separation and exclusion. But, argues Boff, God is three, a Trinity, and being three avoids solitude, overcomes separation and surpasses exclusion. Reading Boff it is clear that he sees the divine community as a model for human community in such a way that it provides the basis for social liberation. For a more qualified plea for a 'social' understanding of the Trinity, see also Pannenberg's chapter 'The Trinitarian God' 1999:259–336, as well as Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is*, 1992:191–245.

20 Jenson 1982:ix.



Hence trinitarian theology seems to be important in a culture of pluralism to identify the Christian God – and thus to exclude false gods. Such a trinitarian identification of God helps us to relocate pluralism within God and thus find our inspiration and empowerment to be open towards the other and otherness from our participation in Christ and through the Spirit in this Triune life.

### 2.3 The doctrine of the Trinity as second order symbol

If we describe hospitality as the openness to, or welcoming of, the other and otherness, it does indeed seem to be the case that trinitarian discourse can offer rich possibilities for a creative rethinking of an ethic of hospitality – an ethic which celebrates otherness without forfeiting identity. Before travelling further along this road, however, it must be noted that not all trinitarian roads are worth travelling. For instance, the doctrine of the Trinity can be used as a heavy super-structure that opens the door for a speculative ‘top-down’ approach to theology in which the doctrine of the Trinity serves in an oversimplified manner as a mere model for our views on personhood, the church and society. It may be worthwhile to quote the German theologian Michael Welker’s sobering remark in a footnote on trinitarian theology at length:

*Whereas trinitarian theology has been quite successful in warding off theological errors and heresies, particularly in the early church, in my opinion its constructive contributions have been relatively modest. Quite contrary to the assertion expressed again and again that trinitarian theology is the centre of dogmatics, and that all the dogmatic parts are, or should at least be, stamped and penetrated by this different picture, they either dogmatize very meagre or use completely vague basic ideas of God (e.g. ‘relationality,’ ‘sociality,’ ‘unity and plurality’), or in a reductionist way introduce anthropological phenomena or figures of thought into the doctrine of God and into the overall connections of systematic theology, such as the important, but from a trinitarian points of view insufficient, experience of an encounter of two persons (I–Thou) as aspects of the relation of interpersonal love. Or, completely docetic, they drift above human experiences and the experiences of God expressed in biblical traditions. The fact that they thus use religious symbols in more or less open, conscious or unconscious, ways to strengthen patriarchal or other ideological views of the world can be demonstrated by numerous examples.<sup>21</sup>*

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21 Welker 1998:319.



In this remark, Welker indicates a number of important challenges for thinking about the promise of trinitarian theology. Welker points to the danger of introducing foreign notions back into the doctrine of the Trinity. This becomes possible when we separate doctrine from what Welker calls the ‘human experiences and experiences of God expressed in biblical traditions’. This opens the door to a speculative and abstract theology that seems to be defenceless against charges of idealising and ideologising. The doctrine of the Trinity, as ‘second-order’ language, can never be separated from the ‘first-order’ language of Scripture as heard, read and performed in faith communities. We need to be reminded that, as Donald Juel notes, ‘(f)ull-blown trinitarian faith is a later, creative interpretation of the biblical witness by the church’.<sup>22</sup> In his book *GOD as Trinity*, the Lutheran theologian Ted Peters also reminds us that the doctrine of the Trinity is a second-order symbol and that we must be careful to use the symbol to serve as an ethical ideal or divine model for human society. He comments, ‘There is a better way, namely, to appeal to the primary biblical symbol that is already directed toward human community. I suggest the kingdom or reign of God.’<sup>23</sup> Peter’s remark is important. With regard to this paper’s focus on hospitality, it needs to be stated that the notion of the reign of God also serves as a powerful metaphor for rethinking what it means that the God depicted in Scripture is a welcoming God. Any attempt to relate the doctrine of the Trinity to the moral life in such a way that these first-order symbols are suppressed does an injustice to the rich biblical accounts. This does not mean that we must not, for instance, use the doctrine of the Trinity when thinking about ethical matters, but that we must use it in a ‘soft’ manner – more like a guiding light than as something cast in stone.

However, also with regard to notions such as the kingdom or reign of God, the questions can be asked: the reign of *which* God? How do we *identify* this God? Hence the need for second-order symbols as an attempt to, as Karl Rahner puts it, ‘say once more what we have heard.’<sup>24</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity is therefore important as a type of condensed narrative that can illuminate the first-order symbols.

#### 2.4 The immanent and the economic Trinity

These concerns mentioned above have been manifested in an uneasiness to separate the so-called immanent and economic Trinity. In early twentieth-century theology, which inherited the strong emphasis on divine transcendence from the nineteenth century, the Trinity was often

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22 Donald Juel 1997:.

23 Peters 1993:184, 185.

24 Rahner 2001:80.

viewed from two different viewpoints. The ‘immanent Trinity’ was used to portray Father, Son and Holy Spirit as they are within God’s own inner life. The notion of the ‘economic Trinity’ was used to refer to God as Father, Son and Spirit at work outside the divine life in the world.

In his famous treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity, Karl Rahner remarks ‘that despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are in their practical life almost mere “monotheists”. We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged ... One has the feeling that, for the catechism of the head and the heart (as contrasted with the printed catechism), the Christian’s idea of the incarnation would not have to change at all if there were no Trinity’.<sup>25</sup> Rahner continues to critique the way in which the treatise ‘On the One God’ has been separated from the treatise ‘On the Triune God’ (since the thirteenth century, but with earlier roots)<sup>26</sup> in such a way that it looks as if everything that matters has already been said in the treatise ‘On The One God’. This treatise can easily become quite philosophical and abstract and hardly refers to salvation history at all. For Rahner, the isolation of the treatise of the Trinity has to be wrong, for there has to be a connection between God and humans, because the Trinity is a mystery of *salvation*. Hence Rahner formulates his basic thesis (often referred to as Rahner’s rule): ‘The “economic” Trinity is the “immanent” Trinity, and the “immanent” Trinity is the “economic” Trinity.’<sup>27</sup> There is no inner Trinity apart from the economy of salvation. Rahner writes: ‘God relates to us in a threefold manner, and this threefold, free and gratuitous relation to us is not merely a copy or an analogy of the inner Trinity, but the Trinity itself, albeit as freely and gratuitously communicated.’<sup>28</sup> Many theologians have commented on Rahner’s thesis. It seems, in Ted Peters’s words, to mark ‘a decisive watershed in twentieth-century trinitarian thinking’.<sup>29</sup>

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25 Ibid. 2001:10, 11.

26 See also LaCugna’s [note 647] revealing remark: ‘While the separation of the ‘economy’ and ‘theology’, implicit at Nicaea, allowed Athanasius and the Cappadocians to effectively counter Arianism, the distinction also made it possible for the Christian theology of God, specifically, trinitarian theology, to develop to some extent apart from soteriology’ (1991:43).

27 Rahner (note 665) 22.

28 Ibid. 35.

29 Peters 1993:102. Peters also recalls Walter Rasper’s warning against possible misinterpretations. Firstly we would misinterpret Rahner if we understand the economic Trinity as a mere temporal manifestation of an eternal immanent Trinity, because history really counts. Secondly

Catherine LaCugna, whose thought is deeply influenced by Rahner, feels that Rahner's axiom needs interpretation and application. She sees the great merit of Rahner's axiom that no adequate distinction can be made between the doctrine of the Trinity and the economy of salvation. Or to use the notions she embraces in her study, there is an essential unity between *oikonomia* and *theologia*. She continues, however, to point out that with regard to this unity, 'there cannot be a strict identity, either epistemological or ontological, between God and God for us'.<sup>30</sup> There is an essential unity, but not a strict identity. Hence her principle: 'Theologia is fully revealed and bestowed in *oikonomia*, and *oikonomia* truly expresses the ineffable mystery of theologia.'<sup>31</sup> And further: 'The economy is not a mirror dimly reflecting a hidden realm of intradivine relations; the economy is God's concrete existence as Christ and as Spirit ... Economy and theology are two aspects of one reality: the mystery of divine-human communion.'<sup>32</sup> LaCugna asks for a revision, which she views as a return to the biblical and pre-Nicene pattern of thought, that suggests not merely that we abandon the misleading terms of immanent and economic Trinity, but that we also clarify the meaning of *oikonomia* and *theologia*. *Oikonomia* is not the Trinity *ad extra*, but the comprehensive plan of God reaching from creation to consummation. Similarly, *theologia* is not the Trinity *in se*, but, more modestly and simply, the mystery of God. In all, LaCugna, while making some helpful qualifications and critiquing the language of immanent and economic Trinity, seems to reinstate Rahner's basic intention that trinitarian theology is nothing more than a theology of the economy of salvation. While LaCugna admits that it is true that the distinction between economic and immanent Trinity goes back to the old distinction between *oikonomia* and *theologia* (as Jüngel notes), it is only legitimate 'as a conceptual distinction in which the economic doctrine of the Trinity deals with God's history with the world, and the immanent trinity is its summarizing concept'.<sup>33</sup>

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there is the opposite danger of interpreting Rahner's thesis to mean that the immanent Trinity is dissolved in the economy Trinity, as though the eternal Trinity first came into existence in and through history.

Peters, however, is not totally convinced by Kasper, because it seems to him as if Kasper assumes that the internal relations of the immanent Trinity are already fixed in eternity, so that what is new is merely their manifestation under the 'veil' of history. Peters own response is to propose a third way in which the relationship between time and eternity is reconceived 'so that what happens in the history of salvation becomes constitutive of the content of eternal life' (102).

30 LaCugna [note 647] 221.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid. 222.

33 Ibid. 224.

Some theologians will see in the positions of Rahner and LaCugna the dangers of pantheism and would like to keep the distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity. In an article 'The God of Jesus Christ', the reformed theologian, Colin Gunton, asks, for instance, the question whether approaches such as that of LaCugna finally escape the pantheism that results from any attempt to bring the world too close.<sup>34</sup> Over and against this, Gunton feels that the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity protects God's freedom: 'God's personal otherness from the world is needed if there is to be a true establishing of the world in its own right, as truly worldly creation.'<sup>35</sup>

Miroslav Volf also finds a strict identity between the economic and the immanent Trinity untenable. For him, this would entail the belief that the world is necessarily an integral part of God's life. Volf follows Yves Congar's suggestion (in Congar's book *I believe in the Holy Spirit*) that Rahner's thesis applies only if it is not reversible, that is, that it does not imply the rule that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity. Volf writes: 'There is always a surplus in the immanent Trinity that the economic Trinity does not express.' He continues: 'And the other way around: something new is introduced within the Trinity with creation and

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34 Gunton writes: 'From the logic of their position it is difficult not to conclude that there is ultimately only one reality, the divine-worldly emanation, which constitutes the world and then swallows it up.' (1997:329).

35 Ibid. 329. It needs to be said that Peters (whose approach Gunton also critiques) sees value in the immanent-economic distinction as a way to protect the freedom of God. Peters (note 670) writes: 'The reaffirmation of intimate Emmanuelism cannot be at the cost of the transcendent God who is beyond' ( 22). Peters call attention to the attempt of theologians like Robert Jenson, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann to look for the identity of the economic and the immanent Trinity in eschatology. The genuine freedom of God is thus the reality of possibility, the openness to the future (to use Jenson's language). In my view this dichotomy between the freedom of God and God's relation to the world is also well addressed in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his book *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1994), Charles Marsh recalls the distinction of Barth between the primary and the secondary objectivity of God. This distinction is made to protect God's aseity over his promeity (as is also the concern of Gunton), not as a way to forge a dichotomy between God in himself and God in his relation to the world, but simply to say that before all else God is God. Marsh sees Bonhoeffer's theology as 'a continuous wandering along the various paths of the secondary objectivity of revelation, attentive with an intensity not found in Barth to the inner rhythms of worldliness but by no means disregarding the majestic narrative of God's aseity inscribed by him. Bonhoeffer wants to plumb the depths of the meaning of God's promeity; to understand the earth, its riches, delights and sorrows, in all its christic grandeur' (32).

redemption – the encounter of the self-giving love of God with the world of enmity, injustice and deception.<sup>36</sup>

We make the above brief remarks on the relationship between the immanent and the economic Trinity, because it seems important to take up the, albeit different, concerns of Rahner, Welker and others where we speculate about the inner life of the Godhead in a manner separated from the history of salvation. The far-reaching effect of such a separation is, in the words of Christoph Schwöbel, ‘that the scriptural witness to God’s relationship with creation in the people of Israel and in Christ is irrelevant for understanding the immanent constitution of divine Being’.<sup>37</sup>

With regard to thinking about an ethic of hospitality, this implies that we must guard against grounding an ethic of hospitality in any speculative way in the inner Triune life in a way that it is divorced from the rich biblical accounts. Such attempts are fraught with dangers of idealising.

### 3. Relating the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian moral life

But still the question can be posed: how do we relate the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian life, or more specifically, to an ethic of hospitality?

One possible answer to this question is to argue that the Triune life serves as *model* for the Christian life. Though there is some possible biblical warrant for such an approach, it seems to be highly problematic to limit the moral life to such an ethic of imitation. Such an ethic of imitation fails to take the discontinuity between God’s identity and our identities seriously. What, for instance, is meant by person or relation within the Triune life is not to be equated uncritically with what we understand about human personhood or relationality. Such a discontinuity points to the importance of a hermeneutical task that is marked by struggle, interpretation, ambiguity and embodiment. While an ethic of imitation does help us to find continuity between God’s Triune life and our lives, its failure to deal adequately with the discontinuity – and, we may also add, the category – of sin ultimately turns the moral life into a cold ideal or hard law which leaves no place for grace and gratitude. With regard to trinitarian theology, the temptation is real to speculate about analogies between God’s inner trinitarian life and our vision for personhood, the church and society. While such attempts are rhetorically powerful, they are theologically suspect. These cautionary remarks do not mean that we are doomed to silence with regard to the continuities between God’s identity and ours, but they do point to the dangers of using the notion of

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36 Volf 1998:407.

37 Schwöbel [note 653] 7.

imitation in an uncritical way when relating the doctrine of the triune God to the Christian moral life.<sup>38</sup>

Given this critique of the notion of imitation, it can be argued that the notion of *imagination* is a more adequate notion for making the link between the Triune life and the Christian moral life. The images, metaphor and stories of the triune God fund Christian moral imaginations in a way that enables a different construal of the world that has transforming potential. For some, such a link between imagination and ethics will be problematic, especially for those who espouse certain modernistic ethical theories. For them, the focus on imagination will seem to be subjective, arbitrary and non-rational. These modernistic moral theories, however, have been highly criticised within recent moral discourse. The plea for the moral importance of the identity of the moral agent enables a broader understanding of ethics that creates the space to integrate imagination more fully into our understanding of the moral life. Such a plea for the moral importance of imagination has, among other things, the potential for a more constructive linking of goodness and beauty, or ethics and aesthetics.<sup>39</sup>

While such a link between imagination and the moral life seems of paramount importance, imagination (understood in a certain way) does seem to have limitations as a moral category. It can lead to an individualistic, disembodied view of the moral life that separates imagination from Christian practices, or it can point to the importance of creative genius in such a way that the isolated, autonomous self of the Enlightenment

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38 In his article '*The Trinity Is Our Social Program*', Miroslav Volf (note 677) points, in reflecting on a statement by Nicholas Fedorov, to two equally unattractive options, the one consisting in seeking to imitate the triune God with blatant disregard for the fact that we are not God and the other consisting in respecting our creaturely difference but failing our most proper human calling to be like God (1998:404,405). Volf continues: 'Between 'copying God in all respects' and 'not copying God at all' lies the widely open space of human responsibility which consists in 'copying God in some respects'' (405). Volf acknowledges that there are limits to the correspondences between the triune God and humans. He does not believe that the doctrine of the Trinity provides a social programme, but argues that it does contain the contours of the ultimate normative end to which all social programs should strive. Hence his use of the term 'social vision'. In his book *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Volf gives a more elaborate discussion of his plea that there are broken creaturely correspondences between the triune God and humanity. See especially 191–220.

39 For a reflection on the importance of imagination for Christian ethics, see my article '*Etiek as Optiek? Oor die rol van beelde en verbeelding in die Christelike morele lewe*' (2004).

remains intact. Imagination as a moral notion certainly has the value of critiquing the subject–object dichotomy of the Enlightenment, but it needs qualification.

Given the limitations of certain constructions of the notions of imitation and imagination for providing a link between the Triune life and the Christian moral life, we can ask whether the notion of *participation* is not a more adequate notion. The Christian moral life is not merely about imitating or imagining differently, but about participation in the life of the triune God. Therefore, the Triune life is not merely a model or inspiration, but also the source that enables a Christian moral life. This does not diminish the importance of imagination, but it does qualify faithful Christian imagination as being a participatory imagination (or an imaginative participation). Such a view of the Christian moral imagination as a participatory imagination challenges the less helpful strands of modern ethical theory and holds the potential to give a more adequate account of the relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and the Christian moral life.

#### 4. Enriching the participatory imagination: Perichoretic hospitality

With regard to an ethic of hospitality, there is a wealth of biblical metaphors and narratives that fund our moral imagination (which has been qualified above as a participatory imagination). These metaphors and narratives serve as primary symbols. But it can also be argued that certain secondary symbols within trinitarian discourse can enliven and enrich our imaginations with regard to an ethic of hospitality, particularly with regard to the relating of the notions of identity and otherness. These notions are not abstracted from biblical accounts but can be seen as attempts ‘to say again what we have heard’ (to use Rahner’s phrase once more). These notions cannot substitute the biblical metaphors and narratives, but they can help us in the process of creative embodiment of an ethic of hospitality. While it is certainly possible to recall many such notions, the remainder of this article will focus on one such notion, namely the patristic notion of *perichoresis*, and its reception in more recent trinitarian studies.

In trinitarian studies, reference is often made to God as essentially relational. This is expressed in both the Eastern and the Western trajectories in trinitarian faith, albeit in different ways. It was agreed by the end of the fourth century that the nature of God should be thought of as a communion of persons. The verb *chorea* was sometimes used to express the idea that each person participates in others. Later this was expressed



in a noun, *perichoresis*. This term was first used in a trinitarian context by Pseudo-Cyril in the sixth century and later in the eighth century by John of Damascus.<sup>40</sup> The notion of *perichoresis* takes up the words of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: ‘... believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me’ (John 14:11). As Paul Fiddes notes, the term *perichoresis* had the advantage of emphasising reciprocity and exchange in the mutual indwelling and penetration of the persons, thus expressing ‘the permeation of each person by the other, their co-inherence without confusion’.<sup>41</sup> The Greek term was translated by two Latin terms, namely *circuminsessio* and *circumincessio*. *Circuminsessio* means that the person is contained in another, filling the space of the other, literally ‘seated’ in one another (from the words for sitting and seat, *sedere* and *sessio*). The reference is thus to a state of being. Thomas Aquinas preferred this rendering. The other Latin term, *circumincessio* (from *incedere*, to permeate), was a more active word that captured the sense of movement in and through the other (it was preferred by Bonaventura and other theologians in the West).

Something of this idea of *circumincessio* is expressed in the metaphor that was sometimes used in the Middle Ages to describe the persons of the Trinity, namely that of a divine dance. This is a powerful image and one often evoked in recent trinitarian studies. While the word *perichoresis* does not mean to dance around (it comes from *perichoreo*, not *perichoreuo*, with a short o in the middle), many find the pun on the Greek evocative. Elizabeth Johnson, for instance, writes, ‘a divine round dance modelled on the rhythmic, predictable motions of the country folk dance are [*sic*] one way to portray the mutual indwelling and encircling of God’s holy mystery’.<sup>42</sup> She extends this metaphor to the art created by modern choreographers in their attempt to express something of the anguish and ecstasy of the modern spirit, signifying a more complex order. She concludes: ‘Perichoretic movement summons up the idea of all three distinct persons existing in each other in an exuberant movement of equal relations: an excellent model for human interaction and freedom and other regards.’<sup>43</sup> In similar vein, she writes elsewhere that this idea of the divine community as a divine dance serves as inspiration for human community, as well as a prophetic challenge to human relations and social

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40 It can be noted that the earliest theological use of the verb *perichareo* was in the discussion of the divinity and humanity of Christ by Gregory of Nazianzus and Maximus the Confessor. It was used to portray the reciprocity and exchange between the divine and human actions in the person of Christ (see Fiddes 2000:73).

41 Fiddes 2000:71.

42 Johnson 1992:220.

43 Ibid. 221.



structures that subordinate and marginalise. Therefore, she continues, 'the symbol of the triune God summons the church to be a community of sisters and brothers in kinship with the earth, equal partners in mutual relationship, sent to bring the world into this dance of life'.<sup>44</sup> Catherine LaCugna also finds the metaphor effective for its iconoclasm directed against an oppressive hierarchy: 'There are neither leaders nor followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.'<sup>45</sup>

Theologians such as David Cunningham and Paul Fiddes also refer to the communion within the Trinity as a divine dance, but the emphasis is not so much on the 'dancers' as on the pattern of the dance – more about the perichoretic movements than about the movers. As Fiddes states: 'I suggest the image of the dance makes most sense when we understand the divine persons as movements of relationship, rather than as individual subjects who have relations.'<sup>46</sup> Cunningham also finds the image of a divine dance useful, for it suggests order and symmetry in the midst of diversity. Given his view that God is the relationships God has, the image is, however, not a wholly happy image, 'since dances are always done by dancers, thus returning to the original problem of relationality: how to prevent it from devolving into a picture of three separate entities who are only accidentally related'.<sup>47</sup> Without going further into the concerns raised by Cunningham and Fiddes with regard to their critique of the notion of God as substance, it nonetheless seem clear that the notion of *perichoresis* (and its creative linking to metaphors like that of a divine dance) is a way to prevent the isolation and separation of the divine 'persons'. It enables participation. As the German theologian Eberhard Jüngel puts it: 'The doctrine of *perichoresis* helps us to formulate the concrete unity of the being of God in that we think of the modes of God as meeting one another in unrestricted participation.'<sup>48</sup>

Jürgen Moltmann also uses the notion of *perichoresis* as a way to think about the relationship between unity and plurality: 'The doctrine of *perichoresis* links together in a brilliant way the threeness and the unity, without reducing the threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity in the

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44 Ibid. 1997:309.

45 LaCugna [note 647] 272.

46 Fiddes [note 682] 72.

47 Cunningham 1999:180.

48 Jüngel 1976:33. He also writes: 'The significance of the doctrine of *perichoresis* is that it helps us to formulate this unity of the modes of God's being among themselves as the concreteness of God's being. It is an attempt at responsible speech about God' (35).

threeness. The unity of the triunity lies in the eternal perichoresis of the trinitarian persons.<sup>49</sup>

Catherine LaCugna sees the advantage of *perichoresis* in the fact that it avoids the pitfalls of locating the divine unity either in the divine substance (Latin) or exclusively in the person of the Father (Greek), but instead in a true communion of persons.<sup>50</sup>

Colin Gunton also points to the value of the concept in his book *The One, the Three, and the Many*: '(I)t is a concept heavy with spatial and temporal conceptuality, involving movement, recurrence and interpenetration; and secondly that it is an implication of the unity-in-variety of the divine economic involvement in the world.'<sup>51</sup>

The few quotations above point to the fact that many trinitarian theologians view the doctrine of *perichoresis* as a creative image for portraying both relatedness and particularity, both identity and otherness. The notion of *perichoresis* seemingly conveys something of a hospitable participation between the divine 'persons'. It calls up the image of the Triune identity as not a self-enclosed identity but as a self-giving and other-receiving identity. If we believe that humans are created in the image of this triune God, these perichoretic relationships serve as a powerful model and source for lives that challenge the notions of the isolated individual, enclosed identity and cosy homogeneity.

Furthermore, the notion of *perichoresis* is a rich spatial notion that implies movement and mobility, or, as Paul Fiddes puts it: 'The idea of perichoresis kept alive, within the theological system itself, is a challenge to the dominating God whose power lies in immobility and in being secure from being affected by a changing world.'<sup>52</sup>

It is, however, important to note that the notion of *perichoresis* is not about a self-enclosed and self-sufficient dance. No, it is open to the whole of creation: 'There is a richness and space in the divine life, in itself and as turning outwards in the creation of the dynamic universe that is relational order in space and time.'<sup>53</sup> To use Robert Jenson's phrase: 'God is roomy'.<sup>54</sup> Or as Jürgen Moltmann expresses this hospitable openness of the triune God: 'The Trinitarian relationships of the Father, the Son and

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49 Moltmann 1981:175. For a more recent discussion of Moltmann on the notion of *perichoresis*, see his essay '*Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology*' (2000).

50 LaCugna [note 687] 271.

51 Gunton 1991:163.

52 Fiddes [note 682] 74.

53 Gunton [note 692] 164.

54 Jenson [note 661] 226.

the Holy Spirit are so wide that the whole of creation can find space, time and freedom in it.<sup>55</sup>

In summary, we can say that the notion of *perichoresis* seems to imply that there is a reciprocity and inter-dependence between the three persons of the Trinity. This suggests that God is not an eternal solitude, but a timeful communion. There is plurality within God. What makes this notion of *perichoresis* attractive for an ethic of hospitality is, as argued, its potential to link identity and otherness in such a way that identity does not dissolve or otherwise become excluded. We see giving and receiving relationships within the interpersonal life of the triune God. The notion furthermore implies a dynamic movement within God, a movement that has an outward reach towards the whole of creation.

This notion of *perichoresis* can certainly be overburdened, but it helps us to ground an ethic of hospitality in the character or identity of God. It is necessary to note that such an emphasis does not mean that we derive our morality from the immanent Trinity in a way that is divorced from the economy of salvation. To put it differently, to speak as Christians of God's hospitality is to speak of the Cross.

Something of the notion of *perichoresis*, and the pathos of Trinitarian theology, is well illustrated in the famous icon from the 15th century by Andrei Rublev called *The Old Testament Trinity*?<sup>56</sup> It depicts three figures in an open circle. In the background we see the oak at Mamre. In the middle is the chalice (as symbol of the bread and the wine). The icon recalls the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah towards the three messengers. The Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson summarises well the attraction of this icon for an ethic of hospitality:

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55 Moltmann [note 690] 109.

56 The frequent reference to Rublev's icon reflects something of the fact that the renaissance in Trinitarian theology correlates with the renewed dialogue between Western and Orthodox theologians on Trinitarian 'matters'. Many theologians refer to the inspiring character of this icon. Moltmann had a picture of the icon in front of him when he wrote his book *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. Konrad Kaiser comments as follows on the social implications of this icon: 'The cup, which in Orthodox tradition contains both the bread and the wine, is the central message of this icon for the world ... The eucharist cup calls for a daily sharing of bread and of material and spiritual resources with the millions of hungry people in the world. Through them God, the Trinity, comes on pilgrimage to us at every moment.' This comment of Raiser is quoted in Larry Rasmussen's *Moral Fragments and Moral Community* (1993:157) and Rasmussen himself notes that he also has a copy of Rublev's icon in his office. For inspiring meditations on Rublev's icon, see Limouris, *Icons: Window on Eternity* (1990) and Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty* (1990).

*What this image suggests is that the mystery of God is not a self-contained or closed divine society but a communion in relationship. Moreover, its portrayal of the figures evokes the idea that this divine communion is lovingly open to the world, seeking to nourish it. As you contemplate, you intuitively begin to grasp that you are invited into this circle ... This is a depiction of a trinitarian God capable of immense hospitality, who calls the world to join the feast.<sup>57</sup>*

A trinitarian framework that incorporates in a qualified manner the notion of *perichoresis* indeed seems to be promising for a Christian ethic of hospitality. It depicts the triune God as a hospitable and welcoming communion of love. The triune God is the self-giving and other-receiving Host. Through the sacrificial giving in Christ, a gift of hospitality *par excellence*, humans (and the rest of creation) are invited and enabled to participate in the Triune feast of love. In Christ and through the Spirit, it becomes possible to embody what can be called perichoretic hospitality. This serves as a challenge against the isolation from the other and otherness, as well as the loss of particularity through our openness. It holds the potential to emphasise the need for an openness towards otherness without forfeiting identity (contra liberalism), as well as to emphasise identity in such a way that we need not kill others to safeguard our identity (contra nationalism).

We need to keep in mind that notions from trinitarian discourse, like *perichoresis*, are second-order symbols. These notions, however, can be viewed as creative attempts to depict something of the richness of the images, metaphors and narratives of Scripture that portray the God of Israel and Jesus as a hospitable God. Such a process of claiming and reclaiming adequate notions to describe the welcoming God is a continual process. In this regard, hopefully, trinitarian theology will continue to play an important role to free our imaginations and enable truthful speech and faithful lives.

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57 Johnson 1997:299.

# The Trinity and Flourishing

Nadia Marais

## 1. Introduction

Christian theology is under increasing pressure to deal with issues surrounding human dignity and ecological sustainability. In the face of widespread malpractices in which the dignity and rights of human beings (especially women) are violated, and in the light of the ecological crisis in which the earth and her ecology is endangered, much is asked, and much is required, of theology. Churches, congregations, synods, seminaries, faculties of theology, small groups and individual believers the world over are concerned with the well-being of human and nonhuman beings. The first challenge to Christian theology lies here, within the widespread violence (often in the very name of the Christian faith) against nature and neighbours.

The theological conversation that deals with the dignity and well-being of human beings and the ecology traditionally lies within the fields of inquiry of theological anthropology and ecological theology. Moreover, the vision of the ‘flourishing’ of the earth and human beings expresses theology’s concern for ‘the good life’, ‘well-being’ and ‘healing’. Perhaps it is therefore wholly unsurprising that ecological theologians and feminist theologians would have a particular affinity for the theological concept of ‘flourishing’. The theological vision and language of ‘flourishing’ could therefore be a meeting point between the concern for human dignity and the concern for the earth and her ecology.

In my own research, I have found the work of the Reformed theologian, David Kelsey,<sup>1</sup> thoroughly interesting and fruitful in engaging with ecological theology and theological anthropology. Christian

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1 David H. Kelsey, Luther Weigle Professor Emeritus of Theology at the Yale Divinity School in New Haven, CT, has written extensively on theological education (*cf* 1992; 1993), biblical hermeneutics (*cf* 1975; 1999) and theological anthropology (*cf* 2005; 2009). Since the publication of his magnum opus, entitled *Eccentric existence* (2009), Professor Kelsey has become a well-known and an even more widely respected theologian, to the extent that he was invited to deliver the famous Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2011 and

theology's affirmation that human beings and the earth flourish in their relationship with God provides promising common ground between ecological theology's concerns for ecological sustainability and theological anthropology's concern for the dignity of human beings.

Yet such a focus on flourishing is not as elegant and unproblematic as it may seem. Kelsey adds a second layer of challenge to the task of Christian theology in this regard. He writes that 'Christian theology has a large stake in making it clear that its affirmations about God and God's ways of relating to human beings underwrite human beings' flourishing' (2008:1). He argues that '[i]t has been especially important to emphasize this claim in the context of "late modernity"' (2009:1) (or what may be called 'postmodernity'), where the suspicion that Christians magnify God's power at the expense of the freedom and flourishing of human beings is rampant (2008:1). The second challenge to Christian theology lies here, within the assumption that the Christian faith makes human beings out to be small, weak, servile, and docile.

The theological vision and language of 'flourishing' responds to the two challenges to Christian theology outlined above. This chapter proposes to conduct a critical analysis of Kelsey's theocentric perspective on human flourishing in the light of these two challenges. David Kelsey has written extensively on human flourishing, as part of his thinking through various issues within theological anthropology, and for him the vision and language of flourishing is deeply embedded within theological anthropology. His attention to human flourishing culminates in his arguments within his latest book, *Eccentric existence* (2009), and in an article that he wrote as part of a Yale consultation on God and human flourishing, entitled 'On human flourishing' (2008). This paper will therefore limit its focus to these two pieces of writing, and in the process ask the following questions of Kelsey's work: (1) What is the context for the theological conversation on human flourishing? (2) What is human flourishing? (3) What are the implications of this theological vision and language of human flourishing?

## 2. Expressing the glory of God

What is the context for the theological conversation on human flourishing? This first question is a particularly important question to ask, for it deals with the context in which David Kelsey embeds his understanding of human flourishing. 'Flourishing' is grounded in two claims in Kelsey's work, namely that the triune God relates to all that is not God in three interrelated ways and that human beings derivatively express God's glory.

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that he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Tübingen in 2012.

In *Eccentric existence* (2009), David Kelsey makes the fundamental theological claim that the triune God relates to all that is not God in three interrelated ways: (1) God creates all that is not God;<sup>2</sup> (2) God draws all that is not God into eschatological consummation;<sup>3</sup> (3) God reconciles all that is not God to God.<sup>4</sup> Yet creation, eschatological consummation and reconciliation are not only three ways of the triune God's relating, but describe three *narratives* of how God relates to human beings and the earth and her ecology. For Kelsey, this is the core theological idea from which his thinking and writing on theological anthropology springs: namely, that the story of God's relationship to all that exists, including human beings, can be told in three interrelated ways. Moreover, human flourishing is inseparable from God's relating to human beings because the flourishing of human beings is always dependent upon God (2008:1). For Kelsey, flourishing makes no sense, has no meaning or coherence or content or power, apart from the confession that God stands in a relationship with human beings and that it is God that initiates this relationship. The first claim in which human flourishing is grounded is therefore the confession that the triune God relates to human beings.

'Human flourishing' is systematically connected to 'the glory of God', argues Kelsey (2009:310), in that 'the glory of God defines human creaturely flourishing' (2009:314) just as 'flourishing defines human creaturely glory' (2009:310). Kelsey understands 'God's glory' relationally, as 'the full richness of God's reality' which comes to expression in 'God's self-expressive self-giving' and 'God's attractive beauty' (2009:310).

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2 By creation, Kelsey means that human beings are living on borrowed breath, by the gift of having and being a living body. We are alive because God graciously willed and made it so. The appropriate response to God creating human beings and all that we see around us is 'faith' or flourishing on borrowed breath. It is 'in faith' that human beings flourish (2009:310).

3 By eschatological consummation, Kelsey means that human beings are living on borrowed time, by participating in God's own life (2009:510). We can hope in being transformed and liberated into those that reflect God's glory, because God gives us the gift of hope itself (2009:512). The appropriate response to God that draws human beings into eschatological consummation is 'hope' or flourishing on borrowed time. It is 'by hope' that human beings flourish.

4 By reconciliation, Kelsey means that human beings are living by another's death. Jesus' death manifests 'the terrible beauty of the story of God's entering into solidarity with estranged humankind' (2009:722), wherein lies the gift of reconciliation. The appropriate response to God that reconciles estranged human beings to Godself is 'love' or flourishing by another's death. It is 'through love' that human beings flourish.



Human beings are derivatively glorious, in that God's intrinsic glory is expressed in them. God relating to create, to draw into eschatological consummation and to reconcile is a confession of God's relational glory, which leaves its mark upon all that God relates to – including human beings *and* the earth and her ecology. God's relating to all that is not God forms the broader context for understanding how God's glory is expressed in the flourishing of human beings and the earth and her ecology. Moreover, the expression of God's glory is the index of human flourishing. This means that human flourishing cannot, in principle, be measured or counted, but is grounded in the confession that 'the glory of God is human beings made fully alive' (Ireanaues of Lyons) (Kelsey 2008:2). The second claim in which human flourishing is grounded, therefore is the confession that human beings express God's glory.

Together, these two confessions – of God relating to human beings, and of God's glory in human beings – describe David Kelsey's context for understanding human flourishing. Herein we find that human flourishing ought to be understood as an expression of the triune God's relationship to human beings and as an expression of God's glory in human beings.

### 3. Manifesting beauty

What is human flourishing? This second question is an exceptionally fruitful question to ask of Kelsey's work, in that it reveals the rigorous systematic and analytical thinking that Kelsey employs in his writing. David Kelsey defines 'to flourish' in a twofold sense, namely as both 'to blossom' and 'to thrive'.

First, 'to blossom' is 'to manifest the type of beauty of which a given life is capable by virtue of God's relating to it' (2008:2; 2009:315). Kelsey extends the metaphor of flourishing as a blossom by claiming that this may also provide 'fruit' (that may nurture and support the flourishing of others) and 'seed' (that may determine the lives of subsequent generations).<sup>5</sup> Blossoming and blooming therefore have implications for both present neighbours (fruit) and future neighbours (seed) (2008:2; 2009:315).

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5 Kelsey consistently excludes the metaphorical connotation with 'maximal good health' because 'health is problematic as an index of human flourishing' (2009:317) in that by 'health' and 'unhealthy' is understood functionally and self-referentially. This runs against the grain of the logic of his larger anthropological argument, namely that human beings are not finally to be understood in relation to ourselves, but excentrically in relation to God and therefore 'outside' of ourselves (2009:317).



Secondly, 'to thrive' is 'to have oneself in hand' (2008:3; 2009:315). Kelsey does not have much regard for the metaphoric extensions that include the meanings of 'to grow luxuriantly' (because 'it unqualifiedly reintroduces health as a metaphor') or 'to prosper' (because 'it introduces wealth and achievements as metaphors definitive of human flourishing') (2008:3; 2009:315). Rather, he emphasises the sociality (in that human flourishing is inseparable from the flourishing of all creatures') (2009:315) and responsibility (in the sense that human beings 'take charge of themselves wisely for their own well-being' 'and of their contexts') (2009:319) of human flourishing. Thriving therefore has implications for human persons themselves, for non-human neighbours, and for the broader context in which human beings live.

Accordingly, flourishing is the expression of the glory and the beauty of God's relating to human beings. This has social and relational, present and future implications that stretch wider and deeper than the life of an individual, single human being. Yet Kelsey further qualifies his interpretation of human flourishing by way of a number of characteristics of human flourishing that reflect and shape his theological vision and language. Aside from the twofold definition that Kelsey works out, at least five characteristics of 'human flourishing' can be identified from Kelsey's work, namely that: (1) flourishing is contextual and concrete; (2) flourishing is not functional or self-referencing; (3) flourishing is a gift; (4) flourishing is relational and responsive; (5) flourishing is eccentric.

A first characteristic of Kelsey's understanding of flourishing is that 'what counts as 'flourishing' is relative to what flourishes' (2009:314). There is no abstract, ideal, vague, generalised, absolute, or standard way of understanding flourishing against which the flourishing of each and every human person can or should be measured. No such standard exists, argues Kelsey, in that 'flourishing' as a theological concept is, at its heart, 'a highly relative concept' (2009:316). Instead, the flourishing of a human life must be understood contextually (in terms of the networks of relationships in which a human life is embedded) and concretely (in terms of the individual powers and capacities of each human being) (2009:316).

A second characteristic of Kelsey's understanding of flourishing is what it is not or must not be equated with – namely 'human well-being' and 'good health' (2009:511). Kelsey is highly critical of modern academic theology that construes human flourishing as well-being, because it is 'framed in terms of a human subject's relating to itself by an interior subjective act' (2008:9). Where 'flourishing' denotes 'happiness', 'health', 'self-fulfilment', 'self-realisation', 'full actualisation' or 'well-being', it is defined in terms of human beings' internal functioning and

our ability to adapt to larger contexts (2008:9). Wellbeing and health are, however, inadequate and problematic synonyms for ‘flourishing’, in that these are ‘functional and self-referencing terms’ (2009:511).<sup>6</sup> For Kelsey, ‘flourishing’ is not functional (that reduces human beings to that which they are able to think or to do) or self-referencing (in that it is concerned only with itself).

At this point, after the first two characteristics of human flourishing, the basis of flourishing becomes particularly complex. David Kelsey deals exclusively, from here on, with what he simply describes as ‘God relation’. This covers two kinds of relations: (a) ‘God’s relations to human beings’ and (b) ‘human beings’ relations to God’ (2008:20). He distinguishes, at this point, between two broad kinds of human flourishing understood theocentrically, namely ‘type A flourishing’ (which deals with God’s relating to human beings) and ‘type B flourishing’ (which deals with human beings, relating, or appropriate responses, to God) (2008:21). The third characteristic deals with Kelsey’s ‘type A flourishing’ the fourth characteristic deals with Kelsey’s ‘type B flourishing’ and the fifth characteristic treats ‘type A flourishing’ and ‘type B flourishing’ together.

A third characteristic of Kelsey’s understanding of flourishing is its gift-like character. This characteristic deals with Kelsey’s ‘type A flourishing’: in that it affirms the graciousness and givenness of God’s initial threefold relating to human beings. There are, in this regard, three distinct varieties of ‘type A flourishing’: flourishing in God’s relating to create, flourishing in God’s relating to draw to eschatological consummation, and relating to reconciliation (2008:21). This leads him to focus on what it means for human beings to flourish as those who are created (*cf.* 2009:314–332), eschatologically consummated (*cf.* 2009:510–524) and reconciled (*cf.* 2009:703–726). Yet, human beings flourish ‘simply

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6 Although Kelsey has no problem with defining ‘well-being’ in terms of ‘health’ and even in affirming that ‘well-being as health is surely part of the content of a theological account of human flourishing’ (2008:14), he notes that ‘it is a good deal more problematic theologically to define human flourishing as human well-being understood as ‘health’’ (2008:15; original emphasis). The criteria or significance for a *theocentric* account of human flourishing, however, ‘lie in the dynamics of human beings’ relations to God and God’s relations to them’ (2008:15). For Kelsey, the fundamental difference is this: human well-being (‘understood as various kinds of health’) is not necessarily defined (only?) in relation to God (although it is defined in relation to everything else: ‘themselves, to fellow creatures, *and* to their shared social and natural contexts’), whereas human flourishing is defined only in relation to God (which includes both ‘God’s relations to human beings’ and ‘human beings’ relation to God’) (2008:19–20).

in virtue of God's relating to them in three different ways' (2009:46) and must therefore be understood theocentrically, from the perspective of God relating to human beings. Flourishing, in this view, is the sheer graciousness and givenness of God's threefold relating (2009:51 1).

A fourth characteristic of Kelsey's understanding of flourishing is that it is responsive, and therein a responsibility, in enacting appropriate responses to God and neighbour (2009:510). This characteristic deals with Kelsey's 'type B flourishing' in that it affirms the flourishing of human beings in our enactment of what Kelsey calls 'appropriate responses'. Human beings flourish when we respond faithfully – in trust and with loyalty – to our living on borrowed breath (2009:510), when we respond with joyous hopefulness – including thanksgiving – to our living on borrowed time (2009:510), and when we respond with love – a passionate desire for communion with God and neighbour – to our living by another's death (2009:1031). Human beings flourish 'as they act intentionally' (2009:319) and therefore, in short, when we respond in faith, hope and love to God and neighbour. The practices of faith, hope and love are, however, shaped by the first characteristic of flourishing, namely the 'concrete particularities' of the context in which we live and the human (and non-human) beings that we are in a relationship with. The flourishing of a human life is, in this view, relational (in terms of God's relating to human beings and our relating back to God and to one another) and responsive (in terms of our appropriate responses to God and neighbour).

A fifth characteristic of Kelsey's understanding of flourishing is that human beings flourish 'eccentrically'. This characteristic is expressive of both 'type A flourishing' and 'type B flourishing', in that it affirms the eccentricity (which includes God's relation to us and our relation to God) of human existence. The triune God's three ways of relating to human beings together constitute a theocentric picture of the eccentricity of our existence. The central claim of Kelsey in his book, *Eccentric existence* (2009), is that all that is not God is to be understood excentrically, outside of itself, within God's ways of relating to all that is not God. For Kelsey, 'the result of that is that the basis for human reality and the basis for human value both lie, so to speak, outside of human beings – because it finally lies outside in God. So "eccentric" means having your centre outside yourself. And "existence" simply means living as a human being' (Westminster John Knox Press Radio interview with David Kelsey 2009). The appropriate responses to God and neighbour are therefore not merely faith, hope and love, but *eccentric* faith, *eccentric* hope, and *eccentric* love.

Human beings who are 'fully alive' blossom and thrive. Human flourishing expresses God's glory and manifests the beauty of God's

relation not in its functionality or self-referentiality, but in its contextuality and concreteness, gracious givenness, relationality and responsiveness, and eccentricity. It is this glory and this beauty that is the ground of the intrinsic dignity and value of human beings (2009:570).

#### 4. Eccentric flourishing

What are the implications of this theological vision and language of human flourishing? This third question is a fair question to ask next, but a particularly difficult question to answer, in that there may be an indefinite number of changing implications of David Kelsey's understanding of human and ecological flourishing within a given situation, relationship or context. I will, however, trace three possible implications of affirming the flourishing of human beings and the earth and her ecology in light of the two challenges – first, the violation of the dignity of human beings and the ecology; second the assumption that God's power negates the freedom and the flourishing of human beings – outlined above, namely: (1) human and ecological flourishing as a blessing given; (2) human and ecological flourishing amidst suffering, weakness, poverty and ill health; (3) human flourishing as responsibility for human and non-human neighbours.

First, human and ecological flourishing is a gracious gift of God, and therefore a blessing freely given. This means that it is not, in the first instance, a state or condition achieved through self-discipline. As a gift of God, it marks the eccentricity of human beings and the earth and her ecology: the dignity and worth and value of human beings and the earth and her ecology do not, finally, lie within themselves, but outside of themselves, in God's dynamic act of relating to all that is not God. This frees us from the anxiety of ensuring our own flourishing or that of others (including the earth) and liberates us from the relentless 'pursuit of happiness' that marks our world today. Human and ecological flourishing is a gift of God, a blessing given, which cannot be earned or deserved, and which is safeguarded outside of our own selves and our efforts either to protect or to destroy it.

Secondly, human and ecological flourishing is possible amidst the most intense experiences of suffering, weakness, poverty or ill health because it does not mean the achievement or enjoyment of well-being (2008:46). Human beings do not flourish because they are healthy or wealthy, and not only healthy or wealthy human beings reflect the glory of God (2009:317). Likewise, the earth and her ecology do not flourish only when it is well and healthy. Many interesting studies, including the

work of Princeton economist Angus Deaton,<sup>7</sup> make the point that there are important correlations between health, wealth and well-being. Yet David Kelsey makes the point that human beings express God's glory and manifest the beauty of God's relation regardless of their states of health, wealth or well-being. For Kelsey, the point here is pastoral. Human beings and the ecology flourish amidst suffering, weakness, poverty and ill health, because God relates to them regardless of what they are or who they are or how they are.

Thirdly, human flourishing calls for responsiveness and responsibility for human and non-human neighbours. This last point affirms that human beings flourish in a third sense: 'as they act intentionally' 'in their human acting', by enacting appropriate responses to God, each other and the earth and her ecology (2009:319). However, even in taking responsibility for our human and non-human neighbours, we risk violating their integrity or created wholeness (2009:321). Therefore, human beings are called upon to take responsibility for the well-being of others (whether other human beings or the earth and her ecology) *for its own sake* (2009:320) and *not for some goal beyond it* (2009:324). What exactly this responsibility for fellow human beings and the earth and her ecology may mean concretely, will differ. Yet the point remains: human flourishing also means acting responsibly toward others, human and non-human neighbours. This responsibility is not any responsibility, but the specific responsibility to act appropriately towards other human beings and the earth, for their well-being, for their own sake, and not in terms of any goal or purpose that transcends them.

## 5. Conclusion

David Kelsey's theological vision and language arguably provides us with fresh images, new metaphors, and innovative arguments to reimagine human and ecological flourishing. Perhaps this is what Christian theology needs, at this time and in this context, to respond to both the first challenge (of dealing with the violation of the dignity and integrity of human beings and the earth and her ecology) and the second challenge (of dealing with the accusation that God's power implies the lack of human power and flourishing), as outlined above. The confession that God is deeply invested in God's relationship to all that is not God (including human beings *and* the earth and her ecology) and the confession that God is committed to the flourishing of both human beings *and* the earth and her ecology together

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7 Cf Angus Deaton's recently published book, entitled *The great escape* (with the subtitle *Health, wealth and the origins of inequality*) 2013.

guide and shape us toward a present reality where all human beings and the whole earth's ecology may be 'fully alive'.

# The Trinity and Hospitality

Daniel J Louw

## 1. Introduction

In 1967, I was forced to write an examination on the characteristics of God. I was forced to study divine characteristics. Some were knowledgeable and accessible to the human mind and thus communicable. Others were non-knowledgeable and could not be defined and understood as such.<sup>1</sup> I was deeply puzzled and confused. I made sure that I remembered all the ‘undefinable characteristics’ and averaged 87%.

However, ‘God’ became an exercise of the human mind, and I lost my awe for the unfathomable mystery of divine intervention. But then, in 2013, I embarked on a study in iconography (Louw 2014) and came across the relational dynamics of the encircling and hospitable depiction of the Godhead in the Rublev icon – a kind of divine perichoresis as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit focused on the chalice. The attention is on compassionate hospitality and not on metaphysical speculation regarding the essence of Trinity.

To my mind, God became suddenly ‘word-able’ and ‘approachable’, a kind of vivid infiniscience of God.

In his book on the Trinity, Moltmann (1980:25) points out the necessity to re-interpret the categories employed by systematic theology and many ecclesial confessions of faith to describe the dynamics of the Divine Entity: on ‘being God’. In the 20th century, it became clear that meta- and omni-categories are not appropriate any more to articulate the ‘presencing’ of God. What is most needed is mastering the challenge as to how to deal with multidimensionality. This challenge turns to the different encountering narratives in the biblical account regarding the multifaceted countenance (visage) of God. The Godhead was most often defined in terms of strict ontic categories and very prescriptive dogmatic characteristics – God as a supreme being<sup>2</sup> – rather than applying abstract definitions about

1 See in Dutch and Afrikaans the distinction between *mededeelbare* and *onmededeelbare* characteristics.

2 For example, Article 11 in the *Canon of Dordt* professes: ‘And as God Himself is most wise, unchangeable, omniscient, and omnipotent,

the very being of God and the so-called divine characteristics, such as the omnipotence and omniscience of God; that is, language that describes God's 'what' (essential and substantial categories defining an ontology of Being). The challenge within the networking paradigms of contemporary global and functional thinking is to attend to the 'how' of God (God's presencing and being there where humans are).

The term '*presencing*'<sup>3</sup> stands for a kind of encounter wherein the past, the present and the future intersect in such a way that sensing (experience) and present moment (state of being) coincide in order to create a sense of meaningfulness and purposefulness. The point in using 'presencing', rather than merely 'presence of God', is that God's being-there is now described in terms of existential networking and relational categories, that is, categories by which human beings express their acknowledgment of the fact that God's faithfulness is penetrating not merely their mind but also all the dimensions of the being's functions. Even sensuality is part and parcel of the 'how of God' in the happenstances of life. For people who trust God and reflect on the meaning of daily happenstances (teleological reflection, a hermeneutics of purposefulness), the awareness of the diversity and richness of divine interventions coincide in such a way that a linear understanding of time makes place for circularity and a spiral interpretation.

Presencing is about the 'opening of the human mind' (significant reflection) and the 'opening of the heart' (wisdom) as well as a new understanding of God, no longer in terms of fixed substantial categories or rational causative explanations, but in terms of the experiential categories of existential dynamics. The latter refers to open, unfinished, incomplete growth categories that operate within the paradigmatic framework of

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so the election made by him can neither be interrupted nor changed, recalled, or annulled; neither can the elect be cast away, nor their number mislead' (Psalter 1959:40).

- 3 For the use of the concept 'presencing', see its meaning within the parameters of the interplay between a pastoral, psychological and spiritual approach in coaching; '... presencing shifts the place of perception to the source of an emerging future whole – to a future possibility that is seeking to emerge' (Kempen 2015:140). '*Presencing* is a blended word combining *sensing* (feeling the future possibility) and *presence* (the state of being in the present moment) (Kempen 2015:140). 'The boundaries between three types of presence collapse: the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (the emerging field of the future), and the presence of one's authentic Self. When this co-presence, or merging of the three types of presence, begins to resonate, we experience a profound shift, a change of the place from which we operate' (Kempen 2015:140–141).



hope and *adventus* categories. By *adventus* is then meant the coming of God through the means of compassionate being-there where humans suffer. It expresses the notion of 'the living God' in terms of diaconic outreach, charity, comfort (paracletic being-there) and *marturia* (witnessing the gospel). Instead of the traditional *missio Dei*, the emphasis is on the *passio Dei*. Thus, the emphasis is on theopaschitic thinking rather than metaphysical thinking. It further implies a paradigm shift from analytical causative thinking to integrative circular thinking. In Old Testament thinking, 'presencing' refers to the notion of fellowship with God – *coram Deo*, which forms the backbone of the principle of *koinonia*, namely, that worship and celebration in ecclesial thinking is a representation of the divine sacrificial act of forgiveness, reconciliation and mediatory love (replacement) within the quality of graceful interaction between human beings.

The challenge to shift from causative thinking to circular thinking, from metaphysical and substantial thinking, to systemic relational thinking, creates the following research question: If presencing is about the dynamics of God's being-there and being-with (Hall 1993) within the realm of the happenstances of life, the experience of the senses and the occurrence of existential events of pain and suffering, how could the dynamics of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be reframed so that the Trinity is not understood as a fixed status of static entities but as dynamic positions within the divine engagement with the trajectories of life?

With reference to the research problem, the research assumption is that in the re-interpretation of the Trinity, a praxis approach to theological reflection should move from a hermeneutics of metaphysical speculation (ontological interpretation), with the danger of a so-called abstract, fixed and even exclusive inter-trinitarian dynamics between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy spirit (defined by *omni*-categories), to an inclusive, encircling and embracing '*being-there-where-they-are*', to a kind of '*economics of grace*' defined by verbing categories and relational paradigms (the outcome of salvation as enfolded in the renewal and transformation of being and human relationships) (Berkhof 1973). Within a systems approach, the option available is networking thinking, with the emphasis on position and attitude rather than on substance and essence.

God is explained less in terms of character definitions (*hoedanigheid*) and more in terms of active intervening infinities (*hoedoenighede*). Thus, the challenge arises to apply theopaschitic categories to trinitarian thinking.

## 2. From impassibility to passion in praxis thinking

With impassibility is meant the notion that the divine Godhead functions independent of any human influence and cannot be described in terms of any emotional reaction or experience of pain or any other human infliction. Divine aseity is rendered as totally removed from any other being. God is wholly independent and in no way casually dependent. To think of God in terms of passion categories was in fact a kind of blasphemy.

In Greek thinking, it was Xenophanes who warned against the tendency to attribute to the gods what is shameful to human beings. He therefore attacked the popular religious notions of the Greeks with a view to founding a purer and nobler conception of Deity (Stace 1960:41). A kind of wandering God, moving about from place to place (being-there), was totally absurd. Suffering and compassion were not attributes that could be ascribed to a divine entity.

In the Christian tradition, systematic reflection on Trinity (doctrine on Trinity) portrayed God mostly in terms of the more static categories of an ultimate Substance, or absolute Subject (the impassibility of God) (Moltmann 1980).

Since early times of the Christian understanding of Trinity, trinitarian thinking made use of substantial and ontological categories. God was therefore described in terms of a divine substance: *Una substantia – tres personae*. God is One and homogeneous. Simultaneously, God is constituted and differentiated by three individual, divine persons. The three persons are differentiated from one another, but in essence, they are one within the common, divine Substance (Moltmann 1980:31–32).

The influence of the Aufklärung (Enlightenment) on theological thinking was a paradigmatic shift away from metaphysical principles (*arché*-categories) to rational categories shaped by positivistic terminology correlating with subjectivity: a hermeneutics of mindful, rational personalities and analytical reflection.

Thus, it was emphasised that God should be addressed in personal categories (Moltmann 1980:31). Subjectivity and personhood became the categories to reframe a static Godhead, as projected by Hellenistic thinking.

Static and substantial categories were used to probe the mystery of the triadic interconnectedness of the divine. In the *Heidelberg Catechism*, it is postulated that Christ is true man and true God. With regard to his human nature, he is no more on earth; but with regard to his Godhead, majesty and Spirit, he is at no time absent from us (Psalter 1959:29). A careful analysis of this kind of formulation makes one aware of the impact of Platonic dualism in metaphysical thinking, that is, probing into the

ontic substance of a divine and transcendent entity. The implied tension between the divine dimension and the human dimension causes an ontic split, with the intriguing question as to how faith can maintain the unity of God. Question 48 poses the following dilemma (Psalter 1959):

*But if his human nature is not present wherever his Godhead is, are not then these two natures in Christ separated from one another? The answer: Not at all; for since the Godhead is illimitable and omnipresent, it must follow that it is beyond the bounds of the human nature it has assumed, and yet none the less it in this human nature and remains personally united to it (Psalter 1959:29).*

The category of personhood is introduced to bring about a kind of ‘psychological’ and ‘rational’ interconnectedness and to maintain a superficial kind of ontic monophysitism.<sup>4</sup> Within this very positivistic and rationalistic paradigm, there was no place for the notion of *passio Dei*.

The notion of divine compassion and its link to suffering was picked up by Küng in his book *Menschwerdung Gottes* (1970). He posed the very intriguing question: Can God suffer and be involved in the suffering trajectories of life and humankind? (Küng 1970:624). According to Küng, this praxis question is the unique challenge to systematic and dogmatic thinking in the 20th century. Apathy cannot be used to defend an abstract and transcendent God-image (Küng 1970:626). God should be identified with human suffering. Thus, the emphasis on *Theopaschite* and the notion: praxis of hope (Hedinger 1968:291).

Praxis thinking therefore implies a paradigm shift from theistic thinking to theopaschitic thinking. It is within this paradigm shift that both Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg advocated for a more open and cosmic understanding of God’s involvement in the history of human suffering, rather than merely sticking to the static categories of abstract ontology (Pannenberg 1965:213).<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the notion of a compassionate God, being-with, within the frailty and weakness of human suffering can play a decisive role in terms of an understanding of

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4 Over and against the threat of polytheism, it was important for the early church to emphasise a kind of oneness in the Godhead. At the same time, it was important not to ‘freeze’ the Godhead into static categories. The notion of ‘monophysitism’ wanted to assert that in the person of Jesus Christ there was only one, divine nature rather than two natures, divine and human, as asserted at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

5 See the publication in 2009 by Keating and White with the title *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*.

compassion as an expression of divine hospitality within the displacement crisis of human beings.

Feuerbach (1904:126–136) was often criticised as an enemy of Christian thinking. His thinking was labelled as a kind of atheistic attack on Christianity. However, when one studies his reflections on the essence of Christianity (*Das Wesen des Christentums*), a different perspective arises. Very interestingly, Ludwig Feuerbach (see Louw 2014, 2016a) explored a totally different avenue. Instead of the rational categories of the human mind, he turned in his critiques on Christian metaphysics to the passion categories of the human heart (the wisdom tradition).

Vulnerability and weakness are constituents of suffering and human experience; they are signs of passionate fulfilment and of a divine force in our being human (Feuerbach 1904:31). One can say that Feuerbach challenges the formal and zombie categories (Louw 2016a) of an institutionalised religion that projected a powerful imperium rather than a vulnerable ecclesiology.

According to Moltmann, Trinitarian thinking should reckon with the following paradigm shift: from authoritative domination to humane fellowship (being-with); from conquering to participation; from production to interrogation and empathetic listening. A new and different approach to Trinity should penetrate the arrogance of a positivistic mind; it should represent the dynamics of networking and should open up new avenues for human beings in their attempt to address issues of inhumane suffering and the destabilisation and destruction of the cosmos (Moltmann 1980:25).

Therefore, my hypothesis: omnipotence should be reframed by a pneumatology of compassionate being-with as an expression of the *passio Dei* within wisdom thinking (*sapientia* as the expression of the dynamics of divine presencing). Passion is not merely an emotional experience, but in terms of God's involvement in the history of humankind, an expression of sincere hospitality. Place and space in life should be viewed as spiritual entities. In this regard, a re-interpretation of the Rublev icon can contribute to the attempt to link in praxis thinking a wandering and compassionate God, to the dynamic happenstances of life as captured by infinite-speech rather than by Hellenistic, static and impassibility categories.

### 3. Basic assumption and presupposition

The basic assumption is that static metaphysical and ontological categories cannot capture the dynamics of pity and compassion. Subjective and personal categories tend to psychologise God in terms of personal identity and self-hood. Metaphysical thinking does not represent the dynamics

of Hebrew thinking with its emphasis on fellowship, communion and encircling embrace. Even if confessions still want to cling to the formulation of ‘essentially one’ (one in substance), but ‘three different persons’, a couple of intriguing questions still prevail: How does it link with wisdom thinking and its concrete focus on life issues? How could trinitarian thinking contribute to the enhancement of the humane quality of life?

My hunch is that instead of substantial and psychological categories, networking thinking should start by thinking and formulating divine presencing in terms of *verbing-categories* and should not apply omni-categories that refer to abstract definition and substantial ontology. In this regard, the notion of *perichoresis* could become most appropriate in order to capture the mystery of a triad of operational divine engagement within the trajectories of life. The how of God’s penetrating *perichoresis* is about an inviting hospitality wherein different perspectives play a supplementary role: the notion of ‘Father’ (perspective of procreator and provider), ‘Son’ (perspective of incarnation) and Holy Spirit (perspective of inhabitation). The challenge in theological reflection will be to move from *definitions of God* to ‘infinitions of God’. Perhaps this is the reason why Hebrew thinking did not want to apply personal or substance categories but thought in terms of ‘to-be-categories’ (JHVH-categories) within the paradigmatic framework of promises regarding the ‘faithfulness of God’: The promise: I will be your God; I am the Exodus God. Therefore, the further promise: wherever you are, I will be there – the accompanying, pitiful God (God-with-you).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the following basic assumption: the Trinity should be reframed in terms of to-be-categories in order to help the church to become a hospitable home for homeless, migrating human beings and restless, violent outsiders, disturbing the comfort zones of content insiders.

#### 4. Core problem

The core problem of this article is the following: Is it possible to portray a Godhead wherein different *infinitions* (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) create an encircling space of fellowship that promotes and equips human beings to rediscover that the dynamics of God encompass all spheres of life and infiltrate the hermeneutics of daily happenstances: the covenantal promise, namely, I will be there where you are? In this dynamic portrayal,

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6 See the question of Moses in Exodus 2:13 and the answer (verse 14): ‘What is his name?’; ‘I am who I am’. The verbing category and infinitive tense refer to a promise that God will always be there where they are, even in the desert, because he is the moving and dynamic Exodus-God.

how can a reinterpretation of the Rublev icon contribute to the paradigm switch from three persons (inter-trinitarian dynamics) to the playful aesthetics of divine *perichoresis* in life?; or the trinitarian economics of hopefulness, meaningfulness and purposefulness – trinitarian teleology? Could such a perspective be linked to a pneumatological interpretation of the inhabitation of God, rather than the traditional incarnation of God?

The challenge will be how to move from substantial and personal categories to more fellowship categories; to move from distancing exclusive categories (divine detachment) to hospitable inclusive categories (divine attachment).

##### 5. The Rublev icon: a hospitable interplay of divine, sacrificial outreach to the stranger

In my research on the link between aesthetics and an understanding of God, I have tried to reflect anew on the attempts of iconography, namely, how to portray God and to depict the Godhead in terms of aesthetic categories. The emphasis in my publication *Icons: Imaging the Unseen: On Beauty and Healing of Life, Body and Soul* (2014) was on the question whether art and aesthetics can contribute to a new and fresh understanding of the *passio Dei* and the implications of a compassionate God, for example, in respect of Christian anthropology, human sexuality and the gender debate, specifically on a re-interpretation of maleness.

The research project (2014) attended predominantly to an analysis of the Rublev icon on Trinity. Bunge (2007:79) pointed out that the very famous Russian icon by Rublev was used as a festival icon related to Pentecost (as a result of, among other things, the legacy of Sergii of Radoneh). In the Russian tradition, Pentecost became the feast of the Holy Trinity as an indication of a time of the fulfilment of hope,<sup>7</sup> a kind of pneumatological festivity of relationships. In this article, I want to explore the connection between Trinity and the aesthetics of festivity and pneumatology. The intention is to apply the research material to the theological hermeneutics of *infinition*, rather than *definition*.

Within the tradition of Christian spirituality, the narrative on the hospitality of Abraham (Gen. 18) was interpreted as an indication of a Divine event (Alpatov 1998:237–250). In the history of orthodox interpretation,

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7 Andrei Rublev's icon, while being an unsurpassed work of iconography, is first and foremost a 'theology in colour', which instructs us in all that concerns the revelation of the triune God and the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. In this way, iconography serves as a means to preserve Christian truth as formulated by Russian orthodoxy. Iconography and the quest for true doctrine are therefore inseparable.

the three angels acquire the status of the *mysterium Trinitatis* (Bunge 2007:51).

Rather than using words, definitions and formulations, traditional iconography turned to form and colour in order to shape the understanding of the godhead. In the icon, colour and composition were used to represent spiritual truth. In this attempt, ecclesial and dogmatic presuppositions indeed played a pivotal role. Icons therefore should establish the viewpoint of Russian orthodoxy. At the same time, they should connect the viewer with very plastic representations of divine interventions within the narratives of life events and human encounters. For example, Old Testament hospitality was transformed into a messianic Eucharist. The whole composition of the icon was then to enhance the mutual relationship and fellowship within the Trinity, framed against the background of the religious community and the setting in Palestine. The notion of being embraced by God's presence served as an appeal to the viewer to become part of this spiritual experience of being encircled by the Divine presence (presencing) by means of liturgical worship (Louw 2014:169–172). The whole impression of the icon is about embracement and encirclement.

In Andrei Rublev's icon (see Figure 1), the persons of the Holy Trinity are shown in the order in which they are confessed in the Credo.<sup>8</sup> Even before the time of Rublev, the depictions of the Genesis 18 scenes were formally angelological from the beginning (Bunge 2007:51–54).<sup>9</sup> The visitors in the narrative of Genesis 18 were understood as divine messengers or angels. Around 1500 gestures and postures of these three angels (completely identical) were used to describe the doctrine of the inter-Trinitarian relationship. The emphasis was on divine essence within the confessional truth of Trinity.

Important in the painting is composition, the emphasis on a circle and the colours applied to depict a communion rather than substance. The fact that all three figures are clothed in blue (the colour of heaven), and they do have the same faces, was a deliberate attempt to emphasise the notion of corresponding agreement and unison; it reflects the importance of *monophysitism*. However, the difference with abstract metaphysical thinking is that the icon links monophysitism with theopaschitism. The fact that all figures are designed in a circle with the chalice in the middle

8 For more detail, see: Andrei Rublev's icon *On Holy Trinity*. Online: [http://www.holy-transfiguration.org/library\\_en/lord\\_trinity\\_rublev.html](http://www.holy-transfiguration.org/library_en/lord_trinity_rublev.html). Accessed: 04/07/2011.

9 For a more detailed exposition and discussion on the interpretation of the Rublev icon, see Louw 2014:143, 146, 149, 169–172. See also the conclusion on the liturgical value of the icon: Truth as playfulness of a liturgy of life (172–173).



reveals the fact that a 'hospitable Godhead' is located to the notion of a tabernacle: the place of communion under the trees near Abraham's tent. God so to speak is becoming a moveable dwelling (tabernacle) in Israel.

The women present wisdom. The truth in the icon is the profession that God within the three persons is One in terms of a divine wisdom that, in pointing to the chalice, the unifying factor becomes the sacrifice and not the personhood of the three entities. This unity within the triune Godhead is framed in the icon by a mysticism that transcends rational analysis. Despite this mystic element, the communion and fellowship of the divine covenant proclaims the truth of hospitality and communion. The composition is determined by a circle because the intimate (peaceful) relationship with God encircles our being human.

It is believed that the first angel is the first person of the Trinity – God the Father; the second (middle) angel is God the Son; and the third angel is God the Holy Spirit. All three angels are blessing the chalice, in which lies a sacrificed calf, prepared for eating. All three angels have a staff in one hand as a symbol of their divine power as exercised in the shepherding perspective of divine caregiving. However, the emphasis is on the middle angel, even though the gaze of both the middle angel and the angel on the right are directed towards the authority (power) of the angel on the left (the Father). Rublev gave the angel in the middle the clothing of a kind of 'emperor mystique' (Louw 2014) that is characteristic of the authority of Christ. He added an unusual feature: the golden embroidered royal robe (the sewn-on stripe) (Bunge 2007:87).

The first angel, shown on the left, is vested in a blue undergarment (just a small piece of it revealed), which depicts the divine celestial nature. The colour does not display enmity, but as connected to a light purple outer garment, the emphasis is on the royal dignity of this angel. This kind of dignity does not refer to abstraction, but to unique presence and place, namely, to an indwelling presence of the divine factor in life as expressed by the notions of 'home' or 'house'. Behind the first angel, and above his head, towers a house (a kind of tabernacle), the abode of Abraham, with a sacrificial altar in front of it (Louw 2014). This image of the abode has a symbolic meaning: The house signifies not merely the tabernacle narrative of Israel in the desert, but actually God's master plan for creation, and the fact that the divine presence is an expression of divine hospitality. Fatherhood is a familial category and a caregiving engagement with the trajectories of his intimate friend, namely Abraham, as being representative of covenantal friendship. One can see how the other two angels have their heads inclined and eyes turned towards the first angel with great attention, as though conversing with him about the salvation





**Figure 1:** Icon of the Trinity, believed to be created by the Russian painter Andrei Rublev in the 15th century (Russian: Троица, also called 'Rublev's Trinity') Source: Rublev, A. [n.d.] A Holy Transfiguration [http://www.holy-transfiguration.org/library\\_en/lord\\_trinity\\_rublev.html](http://www.holy-transfiguration.org/library_en/lord_trinity_rublev.html) [Accessed 4 July 2011].

of humankind and the promise to abide with human beings by means of communion and companionship. The icon, thus does not become a static image but is embedded and portrayed within the Hebrew setting of the Genesis narrative. It even probes into the whole notion of pneumatology and its connection to Pentecost.

See, for example, the light blue undergarment and smoky-green outer garment of the third angel or messenger. Pale green plays a pivotal role in Russian spirituality. It was used to represent the liturgical colour of Pentecost. Green therefore functions as a symbol of new life; the Spirit as the Giver of Life (Bunge 2007:97).

The following components in the icon are important for a reinterpretation of Trinity:

- The composition, namely, Trinity as an *encircling event* focused around the chalice: the establishment of reconciliation and forgiveness.
- Trinity functions within the *dynamics of liturgy* and not as an abstract dogmatic formulation.
- The paradigmatic framework is *Abraham's hospitality*: inviting strangers (outsiders) as insiders and providing them with elements of life – bread and wine.
- The intersection between eternity (blue) and earth (green) and the connection to the *life-bringing presence of the Spirit*.
- The *establishment of home (God as tabernacle)* to accommodate human beings within the hospitality of an inclusive encirclement: depicting ecclesial events as homecoming.
- The inter-trinitarian dynamics of *encircling movement (relationality)* rather than the emphasis on substantial stability (the impassibility Dei) – the dazzling going around of perichoresis and divine playfulness.
- The unifying factor is not the personality and substance of the three figures but the narrative of Abraham inviting three strangers into his home: hospitality as a factor of trinitarian interconnectedness.

Because of the focus on the chalice, the gaze of the three figures is captured by this wine cup used in the Christian Eucharist, and thereby, the fact that the justification establishes a divine unity promoting and enriching the quality of human life – the economic dimension of an inter-trinitarian dynamics. While the middle figure looks at the Father (left), the Father reveals the intention of encircling embracement by focusing on the centrality of the salvation and reconciliation. The figure to the right points to this centrality so that pneumatology becomes the exposition of Christology within the dynamics of relational encircling and compassionate embracement. In fact, all three figures are pointing to the event of vicarious suffering as an explication of trinitarian interaction

(fellowship/*koinonia*) and compassionate being-with. Compassion thus demarcates life. Divine communion links heaven and earth into a playful event of beautification (significance and destiny of life).

6. The compassionate playfulness of divine encirclement (perichoresis): Homing in on the homeless stranger and outsider<sup>10</sup>

The fact that divine engagement with life should not be expressed in static categories, but in dynamic being categories, is aptly described with the notion of *perichoresis*. Perichoresis refers to a kind of divine playfulness as an expression of immense joy and rotating communion. It is derived from two Greek words, *peri*, which means ‘around’, and *chorein*, which means ‘to give way’ or ‘to make room’ (from Greek: περιχώρησις *perikhōrēsis*).

Perichoresis helps to understand that God’s involvement with life and engagement within the trajectories of different happenstances cannot be expressed by abstract categories but should be portrayed by categories of space, place and encounter. Within God’s covenantal embracement, human beings are encircled by divine events of ongoing ‘hospitable sharing’. The fact is that within the event of hospitable embracement, human beings are encircled within compassionate encounters. God is therefore making room for human beings and their attempts to come to grips with frailty, weakness and suffering. As De Boer (1989:10) pointed out: this kind of encircling dynamics cannot become compartmentalised (De Boer 1989:10); it displays inclusive communication (De Boer 1976:79) and should be captured not by static categories but by means of an infinitive tense: a divine to be.

As a term, *perichoresis* expresses intimacy and reciprocity. The implication is that divinity cannot be expressed by enmity. It should rather be expressed in terms of the systemic, relational networking of human encounters.

Encounter means to make room and space, to influence; it indicates a kind of mutual intersection or interpenetration to reveal the life-giving impact of intimate relationship (communion) – hospitable outreach (*diakonia*) and compassionate being-with (*paraclesis*). In this sense, one can conclude that divine perichoresis is about the playful event of encounters wherein both God and human start to face one another, but, at the same time, become a kind of countenance to other human beings in

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10 For a discussion on the link and interplay between a theology of homecoming and the meaning of *ta splanchna*, see Louw (2017b). On the implication for a hermeneutics of the divine, compassionate being-with the other, the stranger, the outsider, see also Louw (2017b, 2017c).

their quest for dignity, justice and caregiving. Within the countenance of human encounters, perichoresis is making room for 'the other' – a kind of fellowship: homing in on homeless human beings.

To 'face' one another is, in terms of Levinas's thinking, an act of restorative justice, kindness and fairness. It describes a mode of facial disposition; countenance<sup>11</sup> as relational encounter; and countenance as the opening up of one's being-there for the other. This kind of fellowship inhabits traces of divine presencing and caregiving. It acknowledges the other (especially the displaced stranger) by means of hospitable embracement. With reference to Levinas's understanding, fellowship is to become aware of a metaphysical trace – the peculiar trace of the Other. The challenge is not to try to track the footprints,<sup>12</sup> because in themselves they are not signs. One should rather reach out to all the Others that reside in the footprint of *illeity* (Levinas 1972).<sup>13</sup> For Levinas, the challenge in fellowship is to understand the social–ethical entanglements. One should understand them from the perspective of the one-for-the-other (*l'un pour l'autre*). One could thus say that perichoresis as an expression of joyful involvement and encircling, compassionate encounters, is about meeting all others where they are in terms of their daily predicaments.

Countenance in terms of encountering terminology within the confines of Christian theology and theopascitic thinking should be linked to the biblical concepts of *promissio* (promise), *epangelia* (gospel – good news), *eschaton* (not-yet of the future), *parrhesia* (boldness of speech and being), *ta splanchna* (bowel categories referring to intestines), *rh̄m* (pity) and *h̄nn* (grace). The praxis of hope and caregiving is therefore established by the *passio Dei*, the compassion of the suffering Christ – sincerity and the seriousness of God's compassion and faithfulness (*esplanchnizomai*)

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11 By 'face' Levinas means the human face (or in French, *visage*), but not thought of or experienced as a physical or aesthetic object. Rather, the first, usual, unreflective encounter with the face is as the living presence of another person and, therefore, as something experienced socially and ethically.

12 Although the terms 'footprint' and 'trace' are more or less the same, 'trace' refers more to the general concept of a mark left behind; footprint refers more specifically to the meaningful contour (signification) and character of the mark.

13 *Ille* is the Latin form for the third person. *Ille* is a form of addressing the presence of transcendence by means of traces. Because God is transcendent, already ahead and leaves only traces. *Illeity* refers to transcendence as presencing: He is there. He is there as trace, is about testifying that the infinite pass through the finite.

(Gärtner 1978). When linked to perichoresis<sup>14</sup> and countenance, pastoral compassion refers to modality (Ott 1972:127) – to the how of God’s being-with rather than to substantial abstraction of a divine definition.

When applied to pneumatology, perichoresis displays an inhabitational theology as expressed in terms of an interpenetrating pneumatology; the indwelling presencing of God through the Spirit (pneumatology) (*inhabitatio Spiritus Sancti*); perichoresis as a playful pneumatological event describing a kind of ‘osmotic theology’ (Van Ruler 1981:85). Translated into categories of pity, caring and embracing grace, divine engagement and perichoresis refer to the moving, inner grace of God’s compassionate suffering-with. Thus, the argument that bowel categories express in a more profound and convincing mode, God’s kindness and grace. ‘The oldest form of the verb is *splanchnēō*, eat the entrails, prophesy from the entrails’ (Esser 1976:599).

This mode of bowel thinking about God has deep roots in Old Testament thinking. For example, in Deuteronomy 10:17, the power of God, and his transcendent splendid glory, become closely linked to his compassionate engagement with the dehumanising events of life. God’s omnipotence is described not in abstract omni-categories, but in terms of justice and caring categories. God is the Lord of lords and the God of gods because he shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. His countenance is described as follows: ‘He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing’ (Deut 10:18; New International Version).

The point in these texts is that if it is true that praxis refers *inter alia* to intentionality and teleology, *splanchnizomai* reveals the very character of God within the messianic involvement and engagement with human suffering – a being-with (Hall 1993). The *theology of the entrails* reflects God’s being quality (the how question) – it describes a kind of ‘verbing event’ (Louw 2017a).

7. God as a ‘verbing event’: The infiniscience of the *passio Dei*  
Although Karl Barth (1959) was very hesitant to give human beings an active place in the events of salvation, he even calls ‘religion’ a kind of sinful surrogate (degeneration of the covenant of grace) with the

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14 Literally from the Greek *perichoreuō* = to dance around. Furthermore, it is used in theology to describe the mutual exchange between divine presence and human existential reality; the ability to penetrate without losing its unique identity, as well as a metaphor for the description of the mystical, Trinitarian unity and diversity in the Godhead. See also Louw 2016.



danger of confusion and turmoil (KD IV/1 1953:537–538); nevertheless, he emphasises the notion of God-with-us. The latter is describing the being of God in its activity. God-with-us is not a kind of cause and abstract proprium for theoretical or empirical research (a kind of object for reflection); it does not describe a fixed condition *a priori*. God-with-us is essentially an event (*ein Ereignis*). The notion of God-with-us is essentially a description of God's being and life as a 'verbing event' (my interpretation) (KD IV/1 1953:4).

Undoubtedly, it is still difficult for systematic theology to ignore static categories that try to maintain substantial categories defending God's all-powerful status albeit that theologians had already started in the second half of the previous century to link more and more power categories with God's passion, grace and pity (Moltmann 1972).

Both Barth and Schleiermacher took as basic point of reference the notion of God's sovereign power, the notion of an all-powerful God (*schaffende Allmacht*). For Barth, the notion of God's righteousness is a key factor (Barth KD 1V/1 1953:282) in an understanding of the omnipotence of God. For Schleiermacher, the founding factor in a feeling of dependency (*schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*) is also an all-powerful divine factor (*göttliche Allmacht*) (Schleiermacher 1980:2014). Omnipotence functions as a causality that feeds the feeling of dependency. However, in both cases, omnipotence is determined by grace, pity and compassion. Also, Barth links power to the compassion of God (KD 1V/1 1953:84). The nerve and the very fibre of the connection between God and human beings is the *passio Dei* – the history of salvation as the history of passion (*Heilsgeschichte ist wesentlich Passionsgeschichte*) (KD 1V/1 1953:183). In this respect, Schleiermacher also links the notion of God's righteousness (*Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes*) (1980 Teilband 1:348) to the notion of the compassion of God (*göttlichen Barmherzigkeit*) (1980; Teilband 1:356–357).

The point in our argument is that Schleiermacher's connection between our human disposition and sheer feeling of dependency and God's being with us, as well as in the case of Barth (God's being with us as an event of his presencing amongst us), are attempts to translate the divine factor into categories that link life events and the quality of life to compassionate lifestyles informed by the theological paradigm of the *passio Dei*. Habitus should then become a mode of living (compassionate lifestyle) that transforms violent and inhumane lifestyles into acts of meaningful and significant outreach to people suffering from inhumane acts of exploitation in civil society. In this regard, the re-interpretation of Trinity in terms of encircling hospitality of the Rublev icon can help revive

a spirituality of sacrificial sharing and hospitable engagements. Religion thus becomes the social dynamics of a lived religion (Schleiermacher).

The advantage of the notion of 'lived religion', namely, the shift from abstract metaphysical and substantial categories into existential and experiential categories, is that theory formation should start to think more along the lines of dynamic happenstances (the infinition of 'to be') than in terms of life fixed definitions (the definition of essence). 'Thing' or 'substance' is about complex 'infinitives' rather than logical 'definitives' (Nilson 2007). Theory in science has then to deal with flux and an *infinitive mode of knowing*.

'The verbing of God', in terms of an infinitive mode, can be described as a kind of practical theological gerund, a present participle.<sup>15</sup> With the concept 'verbing of God' is not meant a kind of relativism, but a mode of being (Sosein) and presencing activity.<sup>16</sup> It indicates what Berkhof (1973:15) calls a living cooperative activity; God not as a static, immutable Being, but as a saving action of redemption and liberation within the world of phenomena. However, God in his faithfulness (factor of differentiation) demonstrates a kind of 'amen' (āmen = firmness) (Berkhof 1973:17), despite the discontinuity of human experiences.

Verbing points to relationality and encounter (Berkhof 1973:31–35); it describes compassionate being-with (Davies 2001:252; Hall 1993). It could be related to the fact that faith and hope are about a way of life<sup>17</sup> and not about an abstract, static definition of an immutable God.

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15 Used as a verb (a word that is not conventionally used as a verb, typically a noun). Any English noun can be verbed, but some are more resistant than others. *Verbing* results in verbatation. Although in a sense it is the inverse of a gerund, a word that has been *verbed* can actually be turned back into a noun as a gerund. Verbing means: the act of turning a noun into a verb. Hence, verbing is the gerund form of the verbed noun 'verb'. Verbing: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=verbing>. Accessed 13/08/2017. *Collins English Dictionary – Complete & Unabridged 2012 Digital Edition* © William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1979, 1986 © HarperCollins Publishers 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012. See also Miller-McLemore 2012:8.

16 In fact, the concept 'God' in the Old Testament refers to the infinitive of a verb and not to a metaphysical substance or immutable principle. In the case of the naming of God, the concept *Jahvē*, derived from the verb *hjh* (Hebrew), indicates a vivid promise that *Jahvē* will always be there where humans are.

17 The way of life is about a designation for conduct of life. In this regard, *peripateō* is used in a figurative sense as a description of a qualitative approach to life – an indication that one should conduct one's way of life in the paths of justice indicated by God. 'It obtains an outstanding significance as a term for denoting way of life; the nature and the manner

8. Conclusion: Trinitarian dynamics – on becoming a caring and hospitable community

To conclude, inter-Trinitarian perichoresis is not the expression of a substantial pronoun, but the display of a verbing infinitive: Fatherly faithfulness, passionate Sonship and spirit-based *fruitio beatifica*. Trinitarian perichoresis does not describe a static and abstract definition of God, but in terms of the dynamics of the Rublev icon with its focus on a hospitable presence and divine encircling wherein the passion of the chalice (offering and mediatorial suffering) displays the sustainability of compassionate being-with, embracing communion and caregiving. The sustainable and ongoing infinitive tense as captured by the covenantal formula: The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob describes the triad of a verbing God; it displays his mercy and pity by means of the sustainability of fulfilled promises, steadfast faithfulness and compassionate being-with (Louw 2016b).

The formula (God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as an indication of ongoing, steadfast, sustainable faithfulness) challenges the church to become an inclusive caring community within the public space of life: homing in on the homeless. Trinity is actually about establishing human dignity (*humanitas*) by means of a triadic promissiology of hospitable, divine caring: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who promised to be always the God of the estranged and the displaced other (Levinas: the perspective of the one-for-the-other – *l'un pour l'autre*).

The unifying factor in Trinitarian thinking should not be the personality and substance of three persons in the Godhead but, in terms of the Rublev icon, the biblical account on the narrative of Abraham inviting three strangers into his home: hospitality as a factor of Trinitarian interconnectedness and expression of compassion.

In terms of the infiniscience of God, 'Trinity' should represent and display (1) the verbing infinitive of a faithful Father; (2) the verbing infinitive of a suffering Son – vicarious suffering (mediatory); and (3) the

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of the way of life make it clear as to what governs a man in his being and acting' (Ebel 1978b:944). In the New Testament, *anastrephō* describes a way of life as new communion in Christ – to turn away from a previous way of life to a new life of obedience, piety and holiness (2 Cor 1:2; 1 Pt 1:15, 17; 3:16), which determines and stamps the different lifestyle of Christian conduct. Fellowship with God then means to '...translate knowledge into practice' (Ebel 1978a:934). 'To the Israelites, as to the oriental in general, the sheer vitality, concreteness and diversity of life were a source of the utmost delight' (1 Ki 3:11; Pr 3:16; Job 2:4) – life synonymous with health, well-being and success (Ml 2:5; Pr 2:19; Ps 56:13; Eccl 9:9)' (Link 1976:478).



## *The Trinity and Flourishing*

verbing infinitive of the inhabitational Spirit: pneumatological presencing (Louw 2017c).

Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu puts the following challenge on the table of theological reflection (Tutu 2004:33):

*We were involved in the struggle because we believed we would evolve a new kind of society. A caring compassionate society. At the moment many, too many, of our people live in gruelling demeaning, dehumanising poverty. We are sitting on a powder keg. We really must work like mad to eradicate poverty.*

Compassion gives meaning to life. Dostoyevsky concurred with the assumption that without compassion, life becomes an unbearable toil. Compassion makes life bearable. 'Compassion would teach even Rogozhin, give a meaning to his life. Compassion was the chief and, perhaps, the only law of human existence' (Dostoyevsky 1973:263). Compassion is the cornerstone of all modes of ecclesial fellowship; it displays a Trinitarian dynamics of hospitable *koinonia* and *diakonia*.



# The Trinity in Global Religious and Ethical Perspective

Martin Prozesky

*'Religions commit suicide when they find their inspiration  
in their dogmas.'*

Alfred North Whitehead (1926:144)

## 1. Introduction

This essay is about the *doctrine* of the Trinity as classically formulated and retained by the churches, not about the Ultimate Reality that the doctrine is believed by Christians to describe. What follows is an original, creative and inclusive statement of what has emerged for the author about the nature of doctrine from over fifty years of research in the fields of Christian theology, the history of Christianity in the first five centuries of its existence, philosophy, religion studies, studies of human nature, and global ethics; and from the philosophy of religion about methods of critical scholarly enquiry into issues in religion. The essay extracts from that research the most important insights obtained, global ethics most of all, and uses them to offer a way of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. While key insights drawn from that research into the work of leading scholars are obviously not original, the synthesis made of those insights in this essay certainly is original.

Creative and critical work in the philosophy of religion is not basically a matter of working carefully and thoroughly with relevant texts as it is in New Testament research, for example, but of creative, probing, rational thought about the subject matter, in this case religious doctrine in general and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular. In this way, the essay shares the method that characterises *Honest to Goodness* (Prozesky 2019), from which some content is used, as shown and acknowledged below. The paper comprises a first section about what it draws from the academic fields that are used, followed by a section applying what they provide to the nature of religious doctrine in general and specifically to the doctrine of the Trinity.

## 2. Academic perspectives

According to orthodox Christian theology, Christianity can be described as a Trinitarian monotheism, because it holds that the one God is a unity of the Father, the Son who was incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, and the Holy Spirit, the three co-equal persons of the Trinity. It also teaches that God is perfectly and supremely good, loving, infinite and all-powerful, and that in Jesus alone he has acted uniquely for the salvation of sinful humanity. Furthermore, according to orthodox Christian teaching, the saving knowledge of God as the Holy Trinity was revealed only to the Christian faith among the world's many religions. In short, the Ultimate Reality, than which a greater and more perfect reality cannot even be conceived, is taught by Christianity to be none other than the Holy Trinity.

From the history of Christian doctrine comes the important fact that the doctrine of the Trinity was not revealed once and for all but was formulated as we know it today mainly in the fourth century CE after a lengthy process of development. The wording finally adopted is not stated in Scripture, though many Christians contend that its elements are there. As the key words of the doctrine, namely Trinity (from the Latin *Trinitatis*), persons (from the Latin *personae* and the Greek equivalent *prosopon*) show, it reflects the culture and idiom of the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean world in which the early church developed, and not the Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking culture of Jesus and his earliest followers (Mackey 1983:581–589).

This essay contends that the cultural influence just mentioned and the lengthy process of formulating the doctrine of the Trinity show that the doctrine, or any other doctrine for that matter, is a humanly formulated doctrine by people from the Mediterranean world under the powerful influence of their faith and its Scriptures. As such it is naturally prone to the normal human limitations of knowledge and expression of its formulators, no matter how devoutly they believed, like countless Christians ever since, that their work was guided by the Holy Spirit.

It is at this point that a fundamentally important insight from the work of the former Harvard scholar of world religions, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, continues to apply to any doctrine and certainly to the doctrine of the Trinity. In his landmark account of the nature of religion, he distinguished between faith and belief. To have faith is 'to be faithful, to care, to trust, to cherish, to be loyal, to commit oneself'. He added that the commitment is to 'a transcendent dimension'. As such, faith is present in all religions, making it what Smith called 'a planetary reality' (Smith 1979:118–119). Belief, on the other hand, means accepting certain propositions as true, for example, that the rule of law is the foundation of democracy, that the

earth is experiencing global warming, or that God is the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Smith 1979:118).

Since doctrines are propositional in form, they are beliefs and as such are to be distinguished from the faith experience that underlies and inspires them. They form part of the growing body of beliefs, ritual practices, ethical teachings and institutional structures that make up a religious tradition, exactly as the history of Christian doctrine shows about the doctrine of the Trinity in the early centuries of the church.

Smith's work means that the experience of religious faith is a global constant, while beliefs and doctrines are variables that can change with the times, places and cultures of those who formulate and reformulate them. As the founder of modern, liberal theology Friedrich Schleiermacher stated in his great doctrinal work *The Christian Faith*, theology is 'the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in the Christian Church at a given time' (Schleiermacher 1928:88, emphasis added). Seen in that light, the doctrine of the Trinity as Christianity now understands it should not be treated as an unchangeable dogma but as a stage in the journey of faith towards an ever-richer understanding of Ultimate Reality.

Returning now to faith, the question that arises from Smith's definition is this: what is the transcendent reality that evokes faith? To whom or what is the person of faith committed? Philosophy provides the next insight to be used in this essay to offer an answer to that question, in the form of an important insight by the 19th century German thinker Gottlob Frege (1848–1925). Frege distinguished between the meaning or sense of a word and its reference, in a paper with the title 'On Sense and Meaning' (Frege 1984:156–177). Consider the example of the word 'angel'. As used by religious people, it *means* a winged, supernatural being. Many of these people believe that the word *refers* to actual beings of this kind who are believed to exist in heaven and who carry messages from God to the world. Others may say that there are no such beings; instead the word refers metaphorically to the insights and inspirations they believe God gives directly to those he wishes to guide. Secularists may say the word 'angel' refers literally to no such beings since they do not exist. Another example is the word 'unicorn', which means a horse-like animal with a single, straight horn on its forehead. Most of us today would say it refers to nothing other than a purely imaginary construct, or perhaps to a very garbled idea of a rhinoceros (Prozesky 2019:93–94).

Frege's distinction is especially helpful in connection with the words 'God' and 'Trinity'. In the sense used by Christian believers and other theists, the word 'God' means a personal, Supreme Being with the qualities of a perfectly loving father and noble king. Asked what the word

'Trinity' means, Christians will say that it means the threefold unity of the Godhead comprising God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, as the Ultimate Reality. Muslims and Jews use the word 'God' with the same sense, but deny that it refers to any such being as the alleged Trinity, for, according to them, God is a strictly unitary being.

To what, then, does the concept of the Trinity refer, in the perspective of our knowledge of the world's religions and global ethics? Turning to studies of the world's religions, of which the work of John Hick has arguably provided the most influential interpretation in the past half century, perhaps the most important lesson is that the religions all offer humankind, in its many cultures, the assurance that the Ultimate Reality, which the theistic faiths see as a personal, Supreme Being, is the source of the ultimate benefit or blessing of salvation or liberation from whatever is believed to threaten and harm our existence most (Hick 1989:36–55; see also Hutchison 1981:3–8). In short, while the various religions differ greatly in how they speak of the Ultimate Reality, they all experience it as supremely good. Accordingly, this essay contends that goodness of the most perfect kind is what the doctrine of the Trinity can be said to refer to, when seen in the light of the study of the world's many religions.

Other important facts disclosed by the study of the world's religions are that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of a considerable number of personal concepts of God in religions around the world, and that there is at least one other doctrine of a threefold divine reality, the Hindu Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, being the divine Creator, Preserver and Destroyer, respectively. Then there is the reality of the non-theistic religions such as Buddhism, parts of Hinduism and Taoism, for which the Ultimate Reality is not a personal divine being. Taken together, these well-known facts about the world's religions mean that the Ultimate Reality of supreme goodness, which is the chief concern of all religions, is seen and expressed in a range of beliefs of which the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is one very prominent expression. Other believers of the same sincerity, faith, intelligence and learning see it differently.

A crucial question that arises from these facts about the world's religions is what, if anything, could justify the claim to exclusive truth by any religion which makes such a claim, such as Christianity makes about its doctrine of the Trinity. This question is addressed later in the essay.

The author of this essay began researching the subject of human nature – the make-up we human beings all share before our cultures begin to differentiate us into our many forms of consciousness – as early as 1980, presenting the results in three books which are the source of the following summarised account of human nature in relation to faith,

doctrine in general, and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular (Prozesky 1984:99–152; 2007:32–64; 2019:76–85).

The most important result of that research is the insight that we human beings are fundamentally bio-cultural, valourising, social beings, whose survival and prospects of thriving depend on discovering and practising the values that promote well-being for as many as possible and ideally for all, and controlling those who menace it. For us as human beings, it is thus vital to identify and practise the behaviours and forces that make us safe and happy, not just as individuals but, vitally, also as communities, and to see other behaviours such as selfishness, injustice and dishonesty, and the socio-economic and political forces that reinforce those vices, as a threat to inclusive well-being that can sometimes destroy us, and to avoid them as far as possible.

Whatever our cultural differences, our biological make-up ensures that we all share a desire for the greatest well-being and therefore share a profound concern for whatever we come to believe ultimately governs and provides it. That can only be a supreme goodness, a paramount source of blessing, to use religious language. How we come to see the source or giver of the richest, lasting well-being that we all desire comes from our creative intelligence. That also has a biological basis in our brains, but the words and concepts we produce to name and describe it are cultural in nature, culture being seen as the totality of what we humans create and transmit through education in all its forms, informal and well as formal.

Our ability to understand and choose which values we will live by and which we will reject makes us moral beings, capable of developing a sense of good and evil, right and wrong, and capable of choosing which will direct our lives as we pursue the greatest well-being. We human beings are also a highly intelligent species but not an infallible one, least of all about anything that far surpasses us in scope and power, such as the Ultimate Reality. Accepting this, it is surely a very serious error to dogmatize about such profound and mysterious matters.

Global ethics confirms this finding from its perspective. While the various ethical traditions judge the moral quality of issues such as gender differences, the charging of interest, polygamy and the use of violence differently, they converge in a shared judgement that inclusive concern for the well-being of others and for truthfulness are very good, while their opposites of selfishness, unfair exclusion and dishonesty are serious evils (Kidder 1994:18–19, 309–324; Küng 1997; Prozesky 2007:98–145). The implication of this extremely important finding about a shared, global core of basic values is that there is a foundation or source for them, a goodness that matters more to us than anything else, touching



and enhancing the well-being we all desire to experience as richly and sustainably as possible. Humanity's many religious and moral experiences of a supreme, foundational goodness therefore converge. This has five profound implications for understanding the doctrine of the Trinity in the light of the various fields of study reviewed in this section of the essay, implications which are presented in the section that follows.

### 3. Implications for the doctrine of the Trinity

Firstly, as has already been mentioned in passing, doctrines and, for the purposes of this essay, specifically the doctrine of the Trinity, are human constructs, formulated by fallible human minds and conditioned by the cultures and times of their formulation, no matter how sincerely their formulators believe that they are the result of divine guidance. Such is the clear implication of the fields of knowledge presented in the previous section. Perfect divine knowledge does not and cannot become perfect human knowledge. Doctrines must as such be clearly distinguished from the faith and the foundational spiritual experiences that underlie and give rise to beliefs and doctrines. We see this very vividly in Paul of Tarsus, whose letters in the New Testament use the concepts, values and world-view he inherited from his Jewish and Graeco-Roman heritages to formulate his teachings about the meaning of his life-changing experience of a risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Those who in all sincerity and also fallibility gave Christianity the doctrine of the Trinity were shaped by the same cultures as they set forth the meaning, as best they could discern it, of their faith experience of a supreme goodness, which, or who, they trustingly believed had created and was saving and sustaining the world.

Secondly, global ethics and faith in a God of perfect moral goodness both mean that doctrines and beliefs of any kind must be governed and corrected where necessary by ethical values of the highest quality, especially love, justice and truth, and not the other way around, namely that ethical values are governed by religious beliefs, as some believers would contend. Anything unloving, unfair, or involving a failure to seek the fullest possible truth in our doctrines, beliefs and other dimensions of the religious life, such as worship, contradicts the supreme value of the greatest goodness and of a Deity of perfect goodness, and must therefore be restated.

Thirdly, the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith on faith and belief enables us to understand more fully that faith, the human heart of religion, involves a trusting, whole-hearted commitment to a transcendent reality experienced as ultimate, as the most valuable and important of realities, which believers think and speak of in the most appropriate words and

concepts afforded by their various cultures, such as the concept of a personal, supreme being of the Abrahamic and some other cultures. The word 'transcendence' means something that greatly surpasses us in power, value and importance. Some believers see transcendence under the influence of a dualistic world-view involving a clear, radical distinction between matter and spirit, while others reject dualism and see spirit monistically.

While cultural and world-view differences result in a variety of ways of understanding the transcendence to which faith responds, comparative studies of the world's many religions and the study of global ethical traditions both show that while these concepts naturally vary from culture to culture, they have in common the experience that whatever else the transcendent reality is, it is always a force or power of the greatest goodness, which transforms whoever embraces it into ever greater goodness. Along with its Jewish heritage, the Christian movement experienced this supreme goodness as creative, as salvational in the person of Jesus, and also as a power of inspiration and liberation that they called the Holy Spirit.

Fourthly, since the doctrine of the Trinity is early Christianity's attempt to formulate, to the best of its ability, how to think and speak of the ultimate goodness touching its adherents' lives, doing so within the logic of both their inherited Jewish monotheism and their inherited Graeco-Roman thought-forms, it is spiritually and theologically highly inappropriate for its formulation to be dogmatised and treated as an eternal, perfect formulation. Whether that formulation is the best that Christians can do in our much-changed conceptual world is the urgent question Christians must now face and answer, open always to the supreme goodness that should always govern faith.

This takes us to the fifth and final concluding point of the essay, which offers answers to the question of the ethical quality of the doctrine of the Trinity as classically formulated. The answers offered come from two approaches. The first one uses the global ethics principles of desiring and seeking the greatest, sustainable well-being *as inclusively as possible*, and conversely, of repudiating anything that impedes or undermines that goal, such as harm and injustice. The second approach uses the ethical logic of the belief that God is the supremely perfect being, the absolute pinnacle of conceivable goodness.

How ethical is the classical doctrine of the Trinity when assessed on the basis of these two approaches? In asserting that the Trinity is the supremely perfect being, a being of infinite love and goodness, the doctrine can surely not be found ethically wanting. Where ethical concerns arise is

from the norm of maximum, total inclusivity. Not only is this attested to in global ethics, but it also follows from the very nature of a God of perfect, supreme, saving goodness. A God like that would love and save all totally and equally. But other aspects of the doctrine of Trinity seem to contradict this ethical and theological norm for they also assert that the God of perfect goodness and therefore perfect love and justice, has revealed his Trinitarian, saving nature to only one strand of humanity, namely to Christianity, whereas all of humanity needs the saving truth so revealed.

How, if at all, can such seemingly unloving and unjust divine action be justified? This essay ends by proposing that it is here that today's Christians face a crucial challenge, and that is of producing an ethically, logically and spiritually valid justification, informed by but not captive to its doctrinal history, aware of the available knowledge of the world's religions and ethical traditions, and led inspirationally by the sheer beauty and power of an Ultimate Reality of unsurpassable goodness, which Christians see in Jesus himself and experience as the workings of the uplifting power they speak of as the Holy Spirit.

*Progress in truth – truth in science and truth in religion – is mainly a progress in the framing of concepts, in discarding artificial abstractions or partial metaphors, and in evolving notions which strike more deeply into the root of reality (Alfred North Whitehead 1926:131).*

# Engaging Rian Venter's Trinitarian Theology

Anné Verhoef

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I engage in a preliminary manner with Venter's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is preliminary, because it gives only a brief overview of some of the main themes in Venter's theological career, and not an in-depth study of all his publications. Furthermore, I will focus mainly on his seminal work on the Trinity and space, as elaborated upon in his 2006 article 'Space, Trinity and City: A Theological Exploration'. To talk about the Trinity's own space in relation to our physical spaces such as cities quickly steers the discussion in the direction of the dynamics between the three persons of the Trinity, and specifically then the space and time they have with each other. In the last part I will therefore focus on the question of transcendence, and I will bring Jenson's perspective into the conversation as an alternative. I will furthermore investigate to what extent Venter's work also incorporates the Trinity's time in his theological thinking. The article concludes with an appreciation of Venter's valuable theological contributions in developing trinitarian theology in the South African context.

## 2. Venter's trinitarian theology

Venter's theological work spans many decades and he addresses various themes in his many publications. A constant in his work is not only his focus on the Trinity but also on his thinking about, or doing, theology from a trinitarian perspective. For him, the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved but rather a 'heuristic framework' (LaCugna 1991:379) for 'thinking about God, the world, history and humanity' (Venter 2011:6). Venter thus positions himself with theologians such as LaCugna, who states that 'the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life' (1991:1). Others include Karl Barth, with his trinitarian interpretation of God's Word and the positioning of the doctrine of the trinity at the beginning of his *Church Dogmatics* (1975:295-489); John Zizioulas, who argued that '[t]he doctrine of the Trinity gives

us the truth of our own existence' (2006:64); Colin Gunton, who stated that the attributes of God should be thought about from the doctrine of the trinity (2002); David Hart, who grounds God's beauty within divine trinitarian life (2003:253–249); and Robert Jenson, who accepted Rahner's rule that there is 'no ontological chasm between God's triune history in time and his eternal triune being' (Verhoef 2011:249). Jenson, for instance, says that 'the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and vice versa, that is, that God's eternal triune life and his triune history with us in time are somehow one event, that God is not otherwise Father, Son and Spirit in himself than he is among us, and vice versa' (Jenson 2006:32).

Venter's commitment to this trinitarian thought, and his engagement as part of the 'trinitarian renaissance' (Venter 2019b:1), becomes visible in his many articles on this subject. He states, for example, that the 'doctrine of the Trinity could make a contribution to the public discourse on alterity' (Venter 2012c:1), that the 'doctrine of the Trinity opens up perspectives to the fact that the Christian faith can constructively contribute to the public discussion about the nature of society' (Venter 2012d:7, my translation), and that '[t]rinitarian theology offers an optic, a grammar to look at the Other and to think about the Other' (Venter 2012d:7, my translation). Furthermore, in response to Klaus Nürnberger's theology, Venter observes that '[o]rthodox Trinitarian theology has an astonishing vitality and potential to subvert traditional metaphysics, self-constructions and social sense making' (Venter 2018:5). In Venter's inaugural lecture (2011:17), he made one of his strongest appreciative statements about trinitarian theology:

*The ecumenical re-appreciation of the Trinitarian confession is by all accounts a crucial development, which has reinvigorated Christian speaking. New sensibilities have emerged which allow for meaningful revisioning of God, and consequently of Christian identity and Christian public engagement. A relational God who lives in ex-static self-giving, creates Christian communities of hospitality and generosity, and offers a healing vision of truth, goodness and beauty to the world.*

This statement also summarises some of the main points of engagement of Venter with, or from, trinitarian theology. He thinks in a trinitarian way, or from this framework, for example, about how to speak of God (2011), theological knowledge (2012b), the task of systematic theology (2012a), the church's mission (2004), space and the city (2006), ethics (2012d), spirituality (2015), the theological challenges of the South African context (2016a), transformation of the (post-)apartheid university (2016b) on

Schleiermacher (2019a), the Fourth Industrial Revolution (2020), and even Covid-19 (2021, see page 5).

What immediately stands out from this list is the consistent focus on the ethical and practical implications of trinitarian theology for Venter. It is indeed a way of thinking about God, the world, history, and humanity, all at the same time, with the same responsibility about the implications of who this relational God is for our existence. Venter notes, for example, that 'the *who* of God can never be done in abstract isolation from a larger interpretation of life and of fundamental public issues' (2011:8), and in following Zizioulas, he emphasises the relational nature of God as a 'divine being [that] should be viewed in terms of personhood, relationality and community' (Venter 2011:5). About his own theology, Venter (2012a:149) wrote:

*During the past decade or so, I explored this [resurrection and liberation] with the central symbol of the Christian faith, that is, the trinity and the philosophical turn to relationality. In various articles I employed social models of the trinity to address social challenges.*

It is in 'rediscovering the Trinity' (Venter 2012a:149) that the 'authentic critique of the violence inherent in classical theism by women, Black people, and poor people' can be addressed by emphasising the Trinity's 'mystery, relationality, gift, hospitality and beauty' (Venter 2012a:149). These themes repeat in various articles of Venter's, when he applies them to thinking about different contexts and societal challenges. For instance, he emphasised the need for a theological 'turn to Africa' (2012a:150), 'an *expansive Trinitarian imagination*' (2011:8, his emphasis), the need for a Christian grammar that 'will employ language of *personhood*, of *relationality*, and of *love*' (2011:9, his emphasis), that theology must address questions of race, reconciliation and justice in South Africa (2011:15), and that a trinitarian theology is fitting for speaking about dilemmas of 'identity, alterity, unity and diversity, sexuality, entanglement and religious plurality' (2019b:4).

While there is a consistent practical, 'this worldly' and relational approach in Venter's trinitarian theology, he remains committed to a Trinity that is transcendent. In this regard, Venter (2016:187, my translation) wrote:

*The one unique contribution that the church and theology can make in the South African context, is to keep on articulating the reality of Transcendence, of a specific God with a trinitarian identity. Nobody else*

*does this; nobody else sees it as their task. It is precisely this articulating, this naming that makes the cardinal difference.*

Venter is therefore frank in his rejection of the ‘narratives of secularisation and the drive towards immanentism’ (2019:4), the ‘implicit triumph of horizontal transcendence’ (Venter 2020:75), and the ‘domestication of the transcendence’ (Venter 2011:8). He argues for the ‘continued and enduring relevance of transcendence’ (Venter 2019:4) which the Trinitarian confession signals for him, and he pleads accordingly for a ‘revised notion of Transcendence’ to create a better self-understanding and social relations (Venter 2012a:150). This must be a ‘transcendence beyond the confines of classical theism’ (2011:2), which avoids the pitfalls of traditional metaphysics, a more sophisticated way of thinking transcendence that includes ‘notions such as gift, excess, weakness, and the impossible’ (Venter 2012c:7). It is a conviction of Venter that the ‘complexity of life requires regimes of knowledge which are tentative, tolerant and ever expanding, even allowing for transcendence’ (2021:6). The ‘sense of Transcendence, of the Ultimate and the Sacred’ should not be ‘eclipsed in the drive for social relevance’ (2016:5). It should rather be the case that the study of theology and religion ‘prioritises human quests for transcendence, meaning-making and planetary flourishing’ (Venter 2016b:5).

One thus finds in Venter’s trinitarian theology an interesting attempt to balance his emphasis on the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the transcendent nature of the Trinity. In his article on ‘Space, Trinity and City’ (2006), these tensions are brought together in a unique way which warrants further discussion.

### 3. The Trinity and space

In Venter’s trinitarian theology he emphasised the acceptance of Rahner’s rule (Conradie 2019:6), namely that the ‘economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity’ (Rahner 1997:22). Venter (2011:5) explains this in Jenson’s words: ‘The biblical story of God and us is true of and for God himself’ (Jenson 1995:42). The fact that God revealed himself as three persons is therefore taken seriously – this is important because it signifies a metaphysical shift from substance to relationality in thinking about the Trinity. The question of unity is then constituted by ‘that inter-subjectivity which we call perichoresis’ (Moltmann 2000:317). Moltmann speaks of a perichoretic concept of the person within the Trinity, which Venter appreciates as an ‘advance to a mere communitarian one’ (2011:5). It is on this point that



Venter embraces the importance which the trinitarian theology accorded to space (Venter 2011:5), in that each Person is a 'living space for others' (Moltmann 2000:318). This '*social understanding of the Trinity*' (Venter 2011:5, his emphasis) is for Venter the 'exegesis of Johannine saying that "God is love"' (Venter 2011:6), and it is from this vantage point that he explores the relationship between space, trinity, and the city.

Venter's article 'Space, Trinity and City' (2006) is in my view one of his unique and most seminal contributions to trinitarian theology. It is an article in which he gave 'a personal proposal of a trinitarian spatiology that might impact on the way social organisation in the city is approached' (Venter 2006:201). He noted that this research was 'motivated by an ethical concern about the public relevance of theology' (2006:201), which links with so many of his other ethical and practical theological concerns. He argued that space was a theme neglected by theology and that we should focus on spaces like cities, where poverty, injustice and oppression are most visible (Venter 2006:202). Venter (2006:202, his emphasis) qualifies his approach, as discussed above, by saying:

*... only if theology conceptualises space trinitarianly could it aspire to make a contribution beyond the real advances offered by contemporary human geography. By relating space to God as triune, theology employs the grammar of its final truth: the identity of the Christian God.*

To conceptualise space trinitarianly means to think about the space of the Trinity and then seek the implications about how we order spaces like cities. This is an ambitious endeavour by Venter, but he quickly remarks that it is not about 'revitalising utopian thinking as a force for social change' (2006:205–206). Rather, it is to 'address contemporary challenges specifically and expressly from a trinitarian perspective' (2006:206). In this attempt, he finds recourse in the work of the Romanian Orthodox dogmatician, Dumitru Staniloae, and in Karl Barth. For Staniloae, the 'possibility, origin, unity and end of space are to be found in the triune God. It is through the *distinctions* and *union* of the divine persons that space finds its origin and end' (1994:171, his emphasis), while Barth argued – as Venter (2006:208) explained – that 'God possesses space in Himself as triune. It is in this fact that God is love'. Venter (2006:210) made two important observations regarding Staniloae and Barth's perspectives:

*By grounding space in God's own being, a normative framework is obtained. Space finds its true nature in communion. The triune God, who has space, because He is tripersonal and relational, is in his divine nature communion.*

*Space, as relational form between distinct persons, possesses a dynamic quality: potential movement of distancing or approaching. A trinitarian model displays mutual interpenetration, that is, unity without losing distinction.*

To apply these insights to space, Venter emphasised the need to represent space differently so that ‘social transformation can be advanced’ (2006:214). He referred to McFague, for example, whose theological project stands in the geographical paradigm, and connects it specifically with justice. In line with his observations about Staniloae and Barth, Venter’s (2006:216–217) proposal in this regard is

*if God in light of his own intra-trinitarian life is spatial, then the relational character of divine spatiality should inform heuristically the quality of human social spatiality. Human spatial ordering is fundamentally a matter of ordering relations, that should reflect, echo something of its divine ground and origin. [...] Specifically, my proposal identifies four such qualities: plurality, perichoresis, gifting, and beauty (his emphasis).*

Venter thereby emphasises that the ‘trinitarian spatiology’ should move beyond (as Barth and Staniloae argued) the ‘positioning of God as the mere ground and origin’ (Venter 2006:217). For Venter, the ‘life of God’ should inform ‘materially what our social life should look like’ (2006:217). The plurality entails the ‘spatial creative play of endless variety’ (Venter 2006:217). The perichoresis entails a ‘community without uniformity’ (2006:218). The Trinity as gift is a critique of contemporary economic life and its implications for how we order spaces. The beauty in the divine trinitarian life requires that human special ordering should be beautiful. For Venter, these ‘four trinitarian shapings of space in society and specifically of the city form together the Christian alternative’ (2006:219). The materialisation of this spatial organisation should be motivated ‘by the ultimate eschatological metaphor: the vision of the New Jerusalem’, according to Venter (2006:220).

This proposed trinitarian spatiology is inspiring and a much-needed attempt to think about our spaces from the unique spatial relations of the three persons of the Trinity. A few questions come to mind though: Should we not think about space *and time* at the same time? Does the Trinity occupy a different space and time as us as transcendent? Is it not needed to think in a more radical way about the Trinity’s space, as Robert Jenson does, for example? These questions will be explored in the next section.

#### 4. Time, space, and the Trinity

Venter's very inspiring trinitarian spatiology has some very practical consequences for thinking about our own spaces, and about how to shape it (our cities, our societies, our environment, our relations) according to the space (relations) within the triune life. It is within the Trinity's life, dynamics, relations, love, space (and time) that we find an example of plurality, perichoresis, gifting and beauty which should be reflected in our own lives and spaces.

A crucial aspect of this proposal of Venter's is his insistence that the Trinity is transcendent. In the context of the Trinity and space he also argued that 'any retrieval of space requires a transcendent referent and practical application' (2006:201). The Trinity is the transcendent referent, seemingly something different or separated from the space we occupy. He says that by linking space 'to God as triune ... space is given a transcendent frame of reference and an existential social application' (2006:201). In agreement with Barth, Venter furthermore argued that '*God's own spatiality* opens perspectives on a transcendent *referent* for the origin, possibility, form and redemption of space' (2006:209, his emphasis). This statement makes it very clear that God has a separate space from us, and that God's spatiality can serve only as an example for ours. This transcendent referent is much-needed, according to Venter, and he refers to Gorringer in this regard: 'What is absent in contemporary society, is the dynamic of a transcendent referent' (Venter 2006:212). In the last section of the article, Venter concludes that to retrieve space as theme in theology, it must be grounded 'in the trinity as transcendent referent' (Venter 2006:214).

What is not clear in Venter's description of the Trinity as transcendent is how this transcendence is 'beyond the confines of classical theism' (Venter 2011:2) and how it avoids the pitfalls of traditional metaphysics. It nonetheless offers a more sophisticated way of thinking about transcendence that includes 'notions such as gift, excess, weakness, and the impossible' (Venter 2012c:7). The risk here, however, is that Venter falls back into a metaphysics against which he himself warned. This type of metaphysics (for example, God as the completely Other, beyond/above our world) can quickly render theology irrelevant (Verhoef 2017:181–183), as Venter also points out (Venter 2012c:201).

An alternative to this radical transcendence of God as timeless, immutable, and having his own spatiality is found in the trinitarian theology of Robert Jenson (Verhoef 2008:238–9). Jenson argued that this (God's own spatiality and time) is not in line with the Gospel, or the story of God in the Bible. For Jenson, 'religion is the innate human drive to escape our being in time for a timeless realm beyond, and with its

eternalizing drive Western Christianity has capitulated to the anti-gospel of timelessness' (Gunton 1995:948-9). Gunton (1995:949) offers a good summary of Jenson's perspective on this point:

*In contrast, the Gospel, which speaks of God's radical involvement in our time, is encapsulated in the doctrine of the Trinity. There is therefore no spatially conceived transcendence of God and the world, for that leads back to the timeless. Rather, God's transcendence is to be conceived temporally, as one of futurity, expressed by the priority of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the goal of the trinitarian history.*

Venter is sensitive for this quest to think about God in terms of the biblical story that reveals his identity. This is evident from his acceptance of Rahner's rule, and his (Venter 2011:5) reference to Jenson's statement that 'the biblical story of God and us is true of God and for himself' (Jenson 1995:42). Venter also acknowledged – along with Jenson (1999:14) and Gunton (1997:142) – that creation, or the world, 'is not a thing but a history' (Venter 2021:5, his emphasis). The emphasis of Jenson (in contrast to Venter) is that we are radically part of this history, this time and space, of the identity and life, the perichoresis, of who the trinitarian God is. For Jenson there is no different space or time to be found than that within God.

In other words, while Venter encourages us to look at God's own spatiality as a trinitarian God, as an example of how we should create our spaces, Jenson thinks about all space and time as God's. The beyond/above of the Trinity as transcendent (even as referent) is rejected by Jenson. It is within God's 'roominess' that space and time is created for our existence. As Harvey explains, God is 'the possession of his own extension ... being where he comes from and gets to, as well as the journey in between' (2020:138). This extension should be understood in the context of God's time and space. God 'makes room for us', as Jenson explained: 'God the Spirit is God's own future and so draws to and into the triune converse those for whom the Trinity makes room' (1999:26).

To explain this from another angle, as I did in a previous article (Verhoef 2011:253), one should keep in mind that for Jenson, time is no longer what separates God and world, but time is what they have in common. Jenson argues that time is inside the divine subjective centre of the Trinity. He agrees with Augustine that time is 'the "distension" of a personal reality ... That is: the "stretching out" that makes time is an extension not of finite consciousness but of an infinite enveloping consciousness' (Jenson 1999:34). It is in this 'enveloping consciousness' of the Trinity that time is internal. Time is therefore not outside God, but inside Him, asymmetrical in his perichoresis. For Jenson it is 'exactly the

divine internality of time that is the possibility of creaturehood at all' (Cumin 2007:173). Jenson (1999:25) emphasises the strong relationship between time and space:

*[F]or God to create is for him to make accommodation in his triune life for other persons and things than the three whose mutual life he is. In himself, he opens room, and that act is the event of creation ... We call this accommodation in the triune life 'time' ... creation is above all God's taking time for us.*

Hence, for Jenson, created time is accommodation for persons other than God in God's eternity, and therefore we can speak about 'God's roominess' (Jenson 1999:25). The implication of this is that everything seems to exist in God and that there is no other way possible for things to exist. Our space and time are found in the perichoresis of the three persons of the Trinity, in their 'dramatic coherence from End to Beginning' (Harvey 2020:137). Because Jenson does not see any way past the temporality of God's action, there 'is no static "essence" of God behind God's act ... God is the event of what happens with Jesus' (his emphasis), and our existence is part of that event.

In this manner, Jenson offers us an alternative, to think about the trinitarian God's space and time in relation to ours. This does not take away the valuable contribution of the trinitarian spatiality that Venter described in terms of plurality, perichoresis, gifting and beauty, which should be reflected in our own lives and spaces. It rather offers an understanding of our time and space as fundamentally part of God's time and space. The tension of understanding God as transcendent (as Venter does), however, is thereby overcome by Jenson, but Jenson's alternative creates its own problems (see Verhoef 2011:253). Jenson is nonetheless consistent in thinking about the Trinity in terms of Rahner's rule, and the need therefore to think differently about the Trinity's time and space.

## 5. Conclusion

This article does not argue for the acceptance of Jenson's trinitarian theology, especially regarding the relation of the Trinity to time and space. Rather, it is an appreciative exposition of Venter's trinitarian theology in which I highlighted some unresolved tensions in Venter's understanding of the Trinity as transcendent, and the space of the Trinity in relation to ours. I indicated that although Venter developed a unique description of trinitarian spatiology, it remains at risk of falling in all the traditional metaphysical pitfalls – a danger in theology which Venter also points out.

Jenson's alternative understanding was presented as a creative attempt to overcome these metaphysical tensions. The Trinity is not removed in terms of space and time according to Jenson, but the Trinity is 'roomy' and has 'extent' to make space and time for us within it. Such an understanding of God's space and time leads to the question of how to apply Venter's trinitarian spatiology to 'our' spaces. This will require a much more radical thinking about our existence in and with God than that which Venter presented. It may, however, help to resolve the tension (problems) of transcendence and metaphysics in his theology.

Venter does not particularly emphasise time in his discussion of the Trinity, although he engages with eschatology and the Trinity in certain passages. I accept that by discussing the Trinity's space (trinitarian spatiology) he included time by implication. Yet this is a theme that Venter could have developed more explicitly in his work.

This exploration of Venter's trinitarian theology and the critique of one specific point, namely Venter's trinitarian spatiology, was done in an appreciative manner. The critique of his theology does not take away my admiration for him as a creative, socially engaged, ethically responsible, practical theologian who contributed to the discipline in many meaningful ways. Venter's trinitarian theology made (to play with his own words – see Venter 2011:17) a meaningful public contribution and unlocked human faculties to think, to act and to celebrate.

## Does Rian Venter Make (Theological) Sense?

Danie Veldsman

‘... *the limping will remain*’ (Venter 2022:5)

### 1. Introduction

Engaging with the systematic-theologian Rian Venter in acknowledgement and celebration of his academic theological contributions for well over thirty years demographically from Pretoria to Lusaka and ultimately to Bloemfontein, is an awarding and theologically enriching experience. He has widely and constructively contributed to South African scholarship on systematic-theological reflection. One of the most prominent foci of his academic scholarship – apart from exploring systematic-theological disciplinary reflection and methodology – has been, from day one until now, the nature and art of religious experience or spirituality (and specifically the experiencing of God, the God-question and Trinity). In most of his latest publications, he strongly emphasises *sense-making* within theological reflection, proposing a (threefold) constructive-theological way to move beyond the traumatic Covid-19 experience. It’s a ‘beyond’ that he explicates with the hope that some of the insights that have been generated by the pandemic will be preserved and have enduring significance. What are these insights for him, and how did they come about? In my engagement with him, I will restrict myself to his three latest publications, namely *Making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic from the Bible – Some perspectives* (2021), *Divine hiddenness, the melancholic self, and a pandemic spirituality* (2022a) and *Pandemic, theological sense-making and the Triune God* (2022b). I will first present and reflect on the core of his expositions and arguments in the three publications, then secondly focus specifically on his understanding of and emphasis on ‘sense-making’ within a pandemic spirituality, posing the question ‘Does Venter make sense?’ I will answer the question by making use of evaluative criteria that I formulated earlier with regard to South African scholarship on Covid-19.



Lastly, I will engage critically with his contribution and the manner in which he sees our unfinished reflection on God and spirituality.

## 2. Venter on God and theological reflection

In *Making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic from the Bible*, which he co-authored with the New Testament scholar Francois Tolmie, each of the authors respectively presents a biblical and systematic-theological perspective on the Covid-pandemic. Against the background statement that more people turn to religion in times of crisis, and from a discussion of six selected studies by biblical scholars (Walter Brueggemann,<sup>1</sup> Ying Zhang,<sup>2</sup> John Goldingay and Kathleen Scott Goldingay,<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright,<sup>4</sup> Philemon M. Chamburuka and Ishanesu S. Gusha,<sup>5</sup> and Peter Lampe<sup>6</sup>), the biblical scholar Tolmie raises a number of methodological and reflective issues that come from their contributions. They are: the source documents of Christianity provide us with a richness of biblical traditions and notions (holiness; mercy; compassion; kingdom, lament etc) that are relevant to such a crisis; each one of the scholars clearly reflects his/her respective social context from which he/she interprets the Bible; a strong emphasis is placed on both lament or groaning as a response to the pandemic *and* on a reluctance to interpret the pandemic as a punishment from God; the determinative role of one's view of God in making sense of the pandemic is discussed; and lastly, strong emphasis is placed on the fact that things cannot continue as before (Tolmie & Venter 2021). In his perspectives, Venter states upfront that intellectual engagement with a complex problem requires a multi- and inter-disciplinary effort. Furthermore, making sense of the pandemic not only requires an appeal to Scripture – including an awareness of the plurality inherent in biblical texts – but also imagination in a rhetorical move beyond the biblical texts. It is a hermeneutical 'move' that necessitates constructive theology. In his own qualifying words:

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1 The title of the book that he published: *Virus as a summons to faith. Biblical reflections in a time of loss, grief and uncertainty* (2020).

2 The title of the article that he published: *Reading the Book of Job in the pandemic* (2020).

3 The title of the book that they co-authored: *Thinking with the Old Testament about the pandemic* (2020).

4 The title of the book that they published: *God and the pandemic. A Christian reflection on the coronavirus and its aftermath* (2020).

5 The title of the article that they co-authored: *An exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–35) and its relevance to the challenges caused by COVID-19* (2020).

6 The title of his book: *Health and politics in the COVID-19 crisis from a New Testament hermeneutical perspective* (2020).

The ‘critical correlation’ between an existential exigency and possible relevant biblical resources necessitates *constructive theology*. The distance between the 2020 pandemic and the ancient textual witnesses is vast; only by way of some form of imaginative construal could meaning result – or, to employ typical hermeneutical idiom, could new possibilities for life be generated (Venter 2021:7).

Sense-making within a *constructive theological move* (that is, for Venter, the question: how does one theologise critical contemporary challenges?) entails, for him, wrestling with the core symbols of the Christian faith. At least three argumentative moves should take place (cf Venter 2021:7), namely relating the challenge (or crisis) to the symbol of the Divine,<sup>7</sup> incorporating<sup>8</sup> the challenge into the overarching narrative(s) of the Bible, and subsequently pursuing or exploring a ‘way of life’.<sup>9</sup> Venter also rephrases the moves as forming the lenses for a theological hermeneutic for reading the Bible in a time of pandemic. Thus, for him, sense-making ultimately entails ‘a comprehensive and coherent reading whilst listening to the voice of the text’ (Venter 2021:7). And in the listening – Venter (2021:8) adds at a later stage – is at stake a ‘peculiar imagination that thinks creatively [of] ontology, vulnerability, materiality and surprise together’. It is in this sense that Venter can insightfully claim that sense-making entails more than an intellectual explanation since emotive responses ‘sensibly’ come into play. To this important remark, I will return below.

In *Divine hiddenness, the melancholic self, and a pandemic spirituality*, Venter (2022a:207) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted societies worldwide and occasioned intense intellectual reflection *to make sense* (my emphasis – DPV) of the phenomenon. Insightfully he states: ‘The COVID condition confronted intellectual disciplines with their public responsibility and the occasion to re-envision their very nature’ (Venter 2022a:207). A new horizon for doing theology has subsequently appeared, namely a state of insecurity (no longer flourishing but a quest for security!). In pandemic terminology, he warningly defines the ‘new horizon’ of doing theology, namely that it cannot take place under

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7 For Venter, a Christian theologising of the pandemic should emphatically be done in the light of the being and the act of the God who identified Godself as Father, Son and Spirit. A Trinitarian approach is for Venter theologically non-negotiable!

8 Venter (2021a:7) describes the second argumentative move as a ‘story that invites participation’, for which I use the word ‘incorporation’, for reasons that will be made clear in the final section of the article.

9 Venter op. cit. (7) calls it the ‘performative function’ of the process of sensemaking.

conditions of sanitation. Our thinking about the Christian faith, explains Venter (2022a:208), is always contaminated by 'historical dynamics of, for example, politics, culture, or wider intellectual *sensibilities*' (my emphasis – DPV). For him it entails the exploration (read: *responsible re-imagining*) of the contours of a pandemic spirituality.<sup>10</sup> His exploration is undertaken as a disciplinary and multi-disciplinary interpretative effort. It entails for him a threefold interpretative moment, namely proposing a specific naming of God (proposal: hiddenness of God<sup>11</sup>), to discern a unique self-understanding (discernment: the melancholic self) since traumatic pandemic experiences have 'not left the human self untouched',<sup>12</sup> and lastly, intimating corresponding practices<sup>13</sup> (practices: lament and othering). Venter (2022a:221) insightfully delineates the contours of a pandemic spirituality in stating:

*The absurdity of the condition should be accepted; life should be embraced with a courage to be ... A pandemic spirituality operates with a different logic and language. God is hidden, the mood is melancholic, transcendence should take place in the banality of everyday routine, fully embodied, with a gaze towards the other. In this condition of anxiety and even despair, one should continue with faith, hope and love, but these should be radically reinterpreted for a new material and disruptive moment.*

Venter, in concluding, remarks that the pandemic may pass, but that he hopes that the insights generated by the pandemic will be preserved and have enduring significance with regard to the angle of interpreting God (hiddenness), the human self (melancholy) and the practices of self-care (the meaning of everyday bodily life and the face of the other).

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10 Descriptively he states: 'The astounding ability of human beings to resist threats, *to make sense* (DPV – my emphasis) and to adapt has been crystallising' (Venter 2022a:208).

11 By means of scholarly examples (Brueggemann, Barth and Tracy), Venter shows how complex it is to interpret the concept of 'hiddenness'. From the examples, he discerns at least three fundamental insights, namely that it refers to the very otherness of God, the very nature of the divine; it could denote the strange providential power of God; it shows that the presence of God is to be found *sub contrario* in conditions of extreme suffering and calls for ethical action (Venter 2022a:213).

12 In relation to the pandemic, the 'new self' that correlates appropriately with a pandemic and a 'hidden God' brings about several options, namely vulnerability, or melancholy (revealing God's otherness and darkness).

13 According to Venter (2021b:216), it refers to 'acts directed beyond immediate sensory concerns'.

In *Pandemic, theological sensemaking and the Triune God*, he asks a question that he subsequently answers in the affirmative, namely whether it is the task of theology to relate the (disruptive) experienced reality to the world of viruses and pandemics. For him it is! Theologians did indeed respond (see Venter 2022b:1) and in this regard, he comments on their responses:

*Christian theology has displayed a striking vitality, in addition to an intuitive reflex that theology should creatively interact with social realities, in order to contribute to public sensemaking (my emphasis – DPV).*

What is at stake is precisely the ‘identification of the Divine in a specific trinitarian manner’ and therefore ultimately the question ‘whether the trinitarian confession of God could contribute to some form of *sensemaking* (my emphasis – DPV) under conditions of a pandemic’ (Venter 2022b:2).<sup>14</sup> Or put differently: whether new configured conceptions of God can result from a crisis. His configuration is subsequently directed by broadening the framework of the question with more questions: How is the pandemic understood? Merely disruptive? Or perhaps as historical caesura? How is ‘doing theology’ understood, and even more importantly, what does it entail to approach theology as sensemaking?

To answer his posed questions, Venter defines sensemaking as a hermeneutical activity, an imaginative play of questions, interests and concerns within a specific historical context (cf Venter 2022b:3). As a hermeneutical activity, Venter cautiously (read: imaginatively) and sensitively moves ‘*horizontally*’<sup>15</sup> from (re-)naming God as key symbol, and especially as Trinity<sup>16</sup> – from ‘sheer pleroma, sheer saturation’ (Venter 2022b:6) – to the crux of Trinitarian sensemaking, namely four ways in which the Trinity could function discursively. First, in the traditional doctrine of ‘appropriation’,<sup>17</sup> the appropriation brings about the challenge

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14 He repeats his question in a more difficult but concise formulation in the subsequent paragraph as follow: ‘How could this faith function heuristically and performatively in a time of disruption?’ (Venter 2022a:2)

15 My use of ‘horizontally’ must be understood in a specific qualified sense as word play on Venter’s (2022a:5) formulation: ‘The presence of God, the God who is weak, vulnerable and suffers, and who is hidden and incomprehensible could be the horizon for sense-making’.

16 In a heuristic provocative manner, Venter (2022a:7) states: ‘The cognitive correlative to Trinity is imagination’.

17 Venter (2022a:8) explains: ‘The work of the Father, Son, and Spirit *ad extra* is one, but also differentiated as creation, salvation and perfection.

to imaginative sense-making to interpret them with contingency.<sup>18</sup> Second, addressing the outstanding task of evil for which Venter proposes an ‘oppositional heuristic’ which, following Jenson, ultimately points to the impenetrability of God’s moral agency. Third, social Trinitarians who have designed various relational anthropologies. Insightfully, Venter (2022b:10) elaborates: ‘The performative effects of the Trinitarian confession reach beyond mere therapeutic moments, gestures of comfort and hope; it nurtures the formation of a *self* as such, a particular kind of human being’. Venter, however, argues (2022b:11) that this is not enough! From the ‘hiddenness of God, the silence and the problematic presence’ we should explore more human practices. He can therefore state:

*Expressions of lament, melancholy, and anxiety do not betray the Trinitarian confession (Venter 2022b:11)*

Fourth, the doctrine of the Trinity has the potential to re-order power relationships. Therefore Venter (2022b:11) remarks: ‘Sense-making takes place in social contexts and is always *political practice*’.<sup>19</sup> After all this is said, Venter *softly* concludes that sense-making with a strange God remains a leap of faith.

From the three articles on sense-making by Venter, the question arises whether his proposal for a pandemic spirituality makes sense. I will answer the question in reference to an earlier engagement with South African scholarship on the pandemic. The ultimate question will be whether they – and Venter in this particular case – in their pursuit of sensemaking help us constructively beyond the pandemic to new insights.

### 3. Does Venter make sense?

More than a year ago the Danish theologian Niels Gregersen, acting as guest-editor for the theological journal *Dialog*, asked me to write an article on the African experience of Covid-19. I accepted the invitation in the

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The distinctive contribution of an intentional Trinitarian approach might be found in this instance’. He subsequently elaborates: ‘The challenge to imaginative sense-making would be to interpret these appropriate associations with some contingency’. He then suggests that we attend to life, cruciformity and novelty.

18 Powerfully, Venter (2022a:8) makes his point: ‘The Trinity allows for thinking life, pain and healing simultaneously’. And: ‘In a full Trinitarian approach to a virological pandemic, interpretative avenues of fecundity, suffering, novelty, time, and justice could suggest a meta-narrative that might make sense’ (Venter 2022a:9).

19 Elsewhere he elaborates: ‘Believers participate in this community of the eternal political life of God’ (Venter 2022a:12).

published article *Sanitation, vaccination and sanctification: a South African theological engagement with Covid-19* (Veldsman 2021a). I limited myself to the South African experiences as expressed in thirty scholarly academic journal publications by South Africans. Apart from listing the themes that they had addressed, I specifically posed the question on their ‘sense-making contributions’ from a formulation of tentative directives or – as it was also called – evaluative criteria.<sup>20</sup> The simple guiding question was: If I were to pose the question on whether they help us to theologically [and] insightfully move beyond the pandemic, what tentative criteria could assist us with our evaluative efforts? In what follows, I will first list the themes, and then the criteria. I will then subsequently engage with Venter’s ‘constructive theological move’, applying the criteria to his ‘move’, and finally I will focus on Venter’s hope for insights beyond the pandemic.

The following main themes or foci that were listed from South African academic theological publications grappling with Covid-19 were: the doctrine of God; hermeneutics and use of scripture; theodicy; anthropology; ecclesiology; pastoral care; technology; mission; morality, theology–science debates, and concrete societal issues<sup>21</sup> (Veldsman 2021). For asking whether their contributions ‘helped’ us to make theological sense of the pandemic, the following guiding evaluative criteria were formulated by means of questions. The evaluative/directive questions (see Veldsman 2021a:7–8) were:

- Does the contribution entertain ‘more eyes’ (and ears – and all our other senses) on the identified issues? That is the necessary requirement of interdisciplinarity. And with interdisciplinarity comes the crucial disciplinary discernment of the hermeneutical acknowledgement of a ‘multi-focal’ approach in our sensemaking of the pandemic.
- Does it acknowledge the pluriversal context in which it is reflecting? That is, the contextual given of an epistemological pluralism.
- Does it reflect hermeneutical sensitivity not only as interpreter (Where am I/we speaking from?) but also for the contextual relevance (for whom is what important and why) of that which is being interpreted?
- How does – from the connectedness of all that is – the integrative approach for our sensemaking in which he emphasises the significance of religion–science discourses find expression in taking on the

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20 The formulated tentative directives or evaluative criteria are clearly qualified in my exposition as ‘tentative’ and ‘incomplete’. They merely function as guidelines to enable a judgement on the worth of the contributions (cf. Veldsman 2021a).

21 For brief notes on each of the themes, see Veldsman (2021a).

identified issues. But also: how is the practical face of the sciences (that is, technology) recognised and managed in its contextual agency?

- How is affectivity in its constitutive role in sensemaking movements and their conversational encounter (explicitly/implicitly) valued, integrated and managed?

If I apply these (tentative) evaluative criteria to Venter's contribution, he complies with most criteria in an exemplary manner, and interpretatively moves us beyond a pandemic spirituality. He does indeed make good theological sense in directing our 'doing theology'. The 'more eyes' are not only explored with regard to doing theology and the specific field of systematic-reflection, but also in relation to other fields (for example, the sciences, sociology, psychology, philosophy) of enquiry. My only hermeneutical concern regarding the 'more eyes' (and ears) is why he does not take (read: incorporate) the other remaining senses more seriously (for example, touch) in a pandemic experience of which he himself said: 'It has not left the human self untouched'. Of insightful importance is his emphasis on a Trinitarian approach (as basis for his sense-making) that he imaginatively employs to broaden (and deepen) a multi-focal exploration of correlating material practices – and also of their revision (for example, dark side). His emphasis on multi-focal exploration is extremely important since each interpretative lens refigures the interpretative outcomes with a richness and broadness of 'more voices' on the experiences. From his understanding of sense-making as more than merely an intellectual exercise comes the refigured self in his strong emphasis on mood, contextuality and embodiment. But the important outstanding question that still has to be addressed is: what about the *more* that he hopes for of post-pandemic preserved insights?

The pandemic has not completely passed (with occasional contemporary and worldwide flare-ups), but has intensely and widely subsided from its initial traumatic devastation. Venter points to preserving (post-pandemically) the suggested angle of interpreting God (hiddenness), the human self (melancholy) and the practices of self-care (the meaning of everyday bodily life and the face of the other). They represent as revisionary response his interpretative moves of theological sensemaking of the Covid-19 traumatic experience. And he has indeed done it in exemplary fashion. To Venter, I would like to pose in conclusion the question: Have you interpretatively revised and stretched, given your insightful emphasis on embodiment and specifically mood, *sensemaking* as more than merely intellectual explanation? For doing theology, sensemaking indeed entails – as you insightfully argue – 'a comprehensive and coherent reading whilst listening to the voice of the text' (Venter



2021a:7). But then you promisingly add that what is at stake is a ‘peculiar imagination that thinks creatively [of] ontology, vulnerability, materiality and surprise together’. Is your ‘think ... together’ indeed radically more than an intellectual explanation as hermeneutical endeavour?

I turn in conclusion to a critical broadening of Venter’s pursuit of sensemaking.

#### 4. Our never-ending unfinished reflection on God, self and practices

Venter will be the first to acknowledge that our reflective efforts and interpretative moves on making sense of the Trinity with love as its grammar comes from and entails ‘sheer pleroma, sheer saturation’ and is therefore inexhaustible and never-ending. It will always remain ‘unfinished business’ ‘that incessantly flows – in his own words – from a “peculiar imagination that thinks creatively [of] ontology”, vulnerability, materiality and surprise together’. Venter’s Trinitarian approach in the re-imagining and re-naming of God is an exemplary directive (as first interpretative movement). So is his exploration of correlative practices (as third interpretative movement). It is on the second interpretative movement, namely the self, that I would like to comment critically in reference to the ‘more’ that he would like to preserve as insight beyond Covid-19.

In my academic opinion, one of the strongest neglected dimensions of all of our intellectual endeavours that I find implicitly in his ‘more’ can ironically be found in his use of the word ‘movement’ and reference to ‘mood’. As said earlier: Venter interpretatively wants to move us as ‘fully embodied persons’ in sense-making beyond the pandemic. Spontaneously, I would like to connect argumentatively and explicitly his proposal of ‘move’ with ‘emotions’, specifically prompted by the Latin etymology of the word, namely ‘*emovere*’. It denotes ‘to move, moving’. It is precisely our emotions (part and parcel of our (embodied) interpretative movements) that brings about movement – or not – in our everyday lives. Or perhaps it is more clearly elucidated in a remark by the Canadian philosopher Ronald De Sousa (2013:1) who wrote:

*No aspect of our mental life is more important to the quality and meaning of our existence than emotions. They are what make life worth living, or sometimes ending.*

Thus, at the very core and heart of all of our sense-making, of our courage to be, lies *that* (read: affectivity) which brings about interpretative

movements (namely mood, feelings, emotions) in the banality of our everyday routine – as Venter himself states – in the condition of anxiety and despair. Put differently: the methodological acknowledgement (and thus integration) of subjectivity (with its affective–cognitive dimension of embodied personhood) in our doing of theology, is in my opinion the most fundamental layer of an authentic post-pandemic spirituality. However, it is precisely its acknowledgement and incorporation that urge and force us, for the sake of the justification of our interpretative moves and credibility, to move beyond the self to intersubjectivity – where ‘the other(s)’ (as persons, methodologies; fields of enquiry) have the last and responsible say. If the Covid-19 traumatic experiences have left no one ‘untouched’ and we yearn to be ‘in touch’ again with reality, it implies that the ‘more’ will only (radically/holistically) be found affectively deeper – for very good, embodied reasons. For me, Venter interpretatively directs us convincingly to the more of the insights we should preserve. For the deeper touch, we will have to explore and broaden our model of rationality for sense-making. To name but one insightful contemporary possibility, it is the work of the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney on carnal hermeneutics (which Venter actually refers to!). From Kearney’s (2021) most recent work, *Touch*, I would like to add a (affective) touch to Venter’s ‘more’ that can capture the deeper touch.

As embodied persons of ‘flesh and blood’, we as *Homo sapiens* (‘wise person’), are the way that life knows life, and all our sense-making efforts find expression in *sapientia*, wisdom (cf Veldsman 2021b:7). As an *anthropos* (‘upward gazer’),<sup>22</sup> each of us is a (self-)conscious, embodied person with a number of body systems made up from groups of organs and tissues. These work together to perform important functions of and for the body. It is especially the nervous, endocrine and integumentary/exocrine systems that represent our first (pre-reflexive and pre-conceptual) embodied interpretative engagement of our affective experiencing of our life worlds. Kearney (2021:36) insightfully explains:

*Our first wisdom comes through touch mediated by flesh – where our sensing is already a reading of the world, interpreting things as this or that, constantly registering differences and distinctions.*

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22 See Kearney (2021:33) for the interesting background to Plato’s reference to the etymology of *anthropos* as ‘upward gazer’.

## Does Rian Venter Make (Theological) Sense?

He adds:

*Since all our senses involve touch, and since touch involves mediation, all our sensations can be said to involve semantic interpretations of some kind, understood as a primal orientation in time and space prior to theoretical consciousness (Kearney 2021:39).*

Thus for Kearney, our first intelligence, that begins with the vulnerability of the skin that negotiates our primary feelings of things, is epidermal. He therefore concludes: 'In touching the world we are constantly prefiguring, refiguring and configuring our (sense-making – DPV) experience' (Kearney 2021:39).

Venter's explication of sense-making of a pandemic spirituality in the three movements of re-naming God (who is for us), the mood of melancholy (in acknowledgement of our fragility) and the practices of self-care, makes so much more and deeper sense than merely intellectual explanation with a much stronger touch of affectivity. This insight we should courageously preserve in doing theology even though the 'limping will remain' (Venter 2022a:5).



## A Letter to Rian Venter

Ernst Conradie

Goeiedag Rian, Dumela, Good morning,

I heard a rumour that you will be retiring later this year. Is that correct? What are your plans? I guess you have a few other things on your mind but allow me to share a concern with you now that you will supposedly have ample time for contemplation.

From your many excellent papers and articles over the last decade or so, I know of your interest in the doctrine of God in general and the theme of the Trinity in particular. I guess that when one reaches retirement age (for me, not yet), one needs to consider what the state of the discipline is in which one was involved. I know that the institutional structures for doing theology in South Africa and teaching practices were of great interest to you.<sup>1</sup> But my concern here is more with the state of the debate and the direction in which it is heading. That leads me to the following question: where is discourse on the Triune God going in the South African context?

May I use you as a sounding board to bounce a few reflections off in this regard? You have always been such an excellent sounding board! I think it is because you took other scholars seriously and have asked them perceptive questions. That makes you the kind of colleague that one always hopes to have.

Let me put this in the form of a thesis, namely that discourse on the Triune God takes place in self-isolating silos, some of which are rather noisy while others are conspicuously silent. This applies globally and ecumenically but also to South Africa. If so, South African debates may well serve as a barometer or better a thermometer to gauge the health of the patient coming for a check-up.

Allow me to be somewhat playful in order to colour-code these silos. I must admit that my attempt to colour-code discourse on the Trinity follows a similar exercise by Jacklyn Cock from 30 years ago, in which she did the same with environmental discourse in South Africa, distinguishing mainly between the 'green' agenda of nature conservation or preservation

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1 I remember with much appreciation your contributions to conferences on theological education and teaching systematic theology. See also Venter (2007, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2016), Venter & Tolmie (2012).

and the 'brown' agenda of ecojustice (given the impact of environmental degradation on the poor, workers, women, children, the elderly). She asked about the apparent absence of churches ('purple') but also recognised the role of 'red' (trade unions) and 'pink' (nowadays LGBTQIA+) movements. All these colours are best put in quotation marks throughout because they are more symbolic and playful rather than literal or exact.

Cock called for a 'rainbow alliance' to address environmental concerns together.<sup>2</sup> However, I need to extend a warning that such-colour-coding should not tempt any of us to think that there is a beautiful South African rainbow in sight where the colours can blend in harmony. That may be nothing but a mirage. There may also be a blinding light, an encroaching darkness or a grey mist. You will see where I am going with this in a moment.

I guess you would want to play along and with your vast reading you will undoubtedly be able to multiply further references. I will focus where possible on South African literature but bring into play some conversation partners from further afield.

### 1. A 'white' Trinity?

Up to 1994, South African discourse on the Triune God has quite obviously been dominated by scholars classified as 'white' under apartheid. With the exception of Brian Gaybba,<sup>3</sup> these scholars were all from the Reformed tradition, including well recognised contributions in textbooks by Jaap Durand<sup>4</sup> (my predecessor at UWC), Johan Heyns<sup>5</sup> (your Doktorvater), Adrio König<sup>6</sup> and Amie van Wyk.<sup>7</sup> Most of these could also be classified as 'European' in the sense that the conversation partners in such textbooks

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2 See Cock (1992). I have referred to her article numerous times. It also played a role in the volume *A Rainbow over the Land* (2000, revised edition 2016).

3 See Gaybba (1987) for a Trinitarian reflection on the Holy Spirit.

4 Jaap Durand's treatment is probably the most thorough discussion of the Trinity in the South African context, even though he takes scant cognition of the Trinitarian Renaissance. See especially his *Die Lewende God* (1976) and *The Many Faces of God* (2007).

5 See Heyns (1978). It is striking that Heyns structures a chapter on 'The living God' with a first section on God's existence (1978:37–47) followed by a section on the 'triunity' of God (47–52).

6 As far as I could establish Adrio König hardly published on the theme of the Trinity. He affirms it in a brief discussion in *Ek is wat Ek is* (1972:18–30), but in his book on God *Hier is Ek!* (1975) there is no section and hardly any discussion on the Trinity. He deliberately avoids Barth's Christological concentration in the doctrine of God (1975:108).

7 See, e.g., Van Wyk (2015).

were from continental Europe, mainly Germany (Karl Barth, Eberhard Jüngel, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg) and the Netherlands (Herman Bavinck, Hendrikus Berkhof, Gerrit Berkouwer, Cornelis Miskotte, Oepke Noordmans, Arnold van Ruler).

After 1994, discourse on the Trinity continued to be dominated by scholars from the Reformed tradition. New names were added, most notably Dirkie Smit<sup>8</sup> (another UWC predecessor) but also Nico Koopman,<sup>9</sup> Christo Lombard and Robert Vosloo<sup>10</sup> (to name UWC alumni only), present company included. The conversation partners were broadened to include the Eastern Fathers (especially with Jaap Durand), British authors (for example, Colin Gunton, John Webster) and American authors (for example, Stanley Grenz, Robert Jenson, Miroslav Volf, Geoffrey Wainwright), alongside more recent European contributions from the reformed tradition (for example, Bram van de Beek and Michael Welker).

It would be grossly unfair to describe such contributions as self-isolating or ‘white’, given the ecumenical way of doing theology and how such authors employed the notion of ‘Trinitarian spreading’ to address a wide range of social issues. Yet, I think one may still say that the theme of the Trinity (despite its emphasis on unity) did not serve as the obvious way to relate such forms of Reformed theology to other confessional traditions, or to other schools of theology in South Africa such as African theology, black theology, feminist theology or liberation theology. It is not as if ‘doctrine divides but service unites’, but one also cannot claim that ‘the Trinity unites’.

Don’t you think it would be interesting to do a study on the theme of the Trinity in the writings of, for example, John de Gruchy, to see whether and, if so, how that functions in his sustained efforts to bridge such divides?<sup>11</sup> One could conceivably do the same for Denise Ackermann, David Bosch, James Cochrane or Albert Nolan, who have scarcely written anything explicit about the Trinity. I remember Steve de Gruchy once saying to me (in private) that his own theology remains thoroughly Trinitarian but that this functions more like an arcane discipline or inner secret of his

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8 See especially Smit’s excellent chapter on the self-disclosure of God (1994) and his masterful discussion of Reformed views on the Trinity (2009).

9 See, e.g., Koopman (2003, 2007).

10 See Vosloo (1999, 2002, 2004).

11 Throughout John de Gruchy’s oeuvre one sees a Trinitarian theology at work without the theme being addressed at any length. References to the Triune God or the Trinity appears infrequently in the indexes of his books (e.g. 1991:111, 118, 2006:139–141, 2013:131). This may well be an example of Trinitarian spreading (as suggested by Smit 2009).



work on theology and development. You may want to add a reference to Klaus Nürnberger's *Faith in Christ Today*, where the theme of the Trinity is discussed but also critiqued – as you show in your subtle review.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. A 'dark purple' Trinity?

Another line of inquiry, closely aligned to 'white' discourse on the Trinity, is the way in which references to the Trinity operate within ecclesial circles. This is harder to fathom, but let me venture a somewhat naughty hypothesis, namely that in several so-called mainline denominations, the 'Trinity' functions as a marker of identity and more specifically of orthodoxy to guard against, let us say, liberalism, syncretism and other ideologies. Other identity markers would be to delineate one denomination from others but also to address internal tensions. The Trinity would thus be something like a Trump card (sorry, but I had to put that in), played for the sake of gatekeeping. It is a symbol of ecclesial authority to get others to toe the party line. As you rightly say, such a flight from the world would be a grave mistake that cannot do justice to the public face of the Triune God.<sup>13</sup>

One may consider another interesting study on some of the moderators of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church to see how they are using (or not using) references to the Trinity in their speeches and writings. Many of them have a background in systematic theology, including Johan Heyns, of course, but also your former colleagues Pieter Potgieter and Pieter Strauss, and others such as Coenie Burger, Nelus

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12 See Venter (2018). My sense is that Nürnberger is correct in recognising that the contrast between experiences of God's creation and of God's benevolence forms the heart of doctrine of the Trinity. To hold together these two aspects (the 'and' that connect the first and second articles of the Christian creed) is far easier said than done. This requires doing justice to God's work of creation and of salvation (see Conradie, 2013, 2015). Any claim for a theology to be Trinitarian without that is facile. However, I also agree with you that his separation of the doctrine of God and the theme of the Trinity and his early rejection of the immanent Trinity as speculative eventually leads to a functionalist (and a curiously existentialist) reduction (see Nürnberger, 1975:566–577, 2016a, 2016b). He also does not do justice to the Pneumatological connectivity between the first and the second articles.

13 As you put it, 'It would be a grave mistake to assume that a trinitarian turn amounts to a flight from the world and its concrete problems. Exactly the opposite is true: the trinity is 'a public truth' and 'ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life'. Doing trinitarian theology means being engaged with life. It is a refusal to abdicate thinking about and addressing social exigencies to mere pragmatism or to moralism with its domesticated generic theology. It is taking the Christian God and life seriously' (Venter, 2004:760).

Niemandt<sup>14</sup> and Nelis Janse van Rensburg. And then there are figures from the apartheid era such as Kosie Gericke and Koot Vorster, but I doubt that they had much to say about the Trinity (!). A similar study could be done on the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk, the Gereformeerde Kerk and the Church of England in South Africa. It is striking that all these church leaders were white, male and aging during their time in office.

An important aspect of a 'dark purple' Trinity is discourse on missional theology and especially missional ecclesiology. The point of departure is the notion of *Missio Dei*, specified as *Missio Trinitatis*, as you rightly picked up in your essay on 'Trinity and mission'.<sup>15</sup> This builds upon a significant workshop on what mission entails, with representatives from several churches in the DRC-family, which was convened at UWC in 1986. Following David Bosch's lead, it defined 'mission' in a thoroughly Trinitarian way,<sup>16</sup> and, accordingly, developed a missional ecclesiology so that the church lives within the mission of the Triune God aimed at establishing God's reign in the world. While 'missionary' describes the activities of the church, 'missional' describes the very nature of the church. I am sure you will agree that this is highly attractive. Nevertheless, I have the sneaky suspicion that 'dark purple' discourse on the Trinity in South Africa tends to be missing the point that Leslie Newbigin, the father of missional theology, clearly recognised. The point is that the church (for example, in England, but also in the USA and in South Africa) has become the recipient (not only the agent or instrument) of its own missionary message so that the church's accommodation to the dominant cultural

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14 See, e.g., Niemandt (2012).

15 See Venter (2004).

16 For a discussion, see Van der Watt (2010), and also Dreyer (2020). The following formulations are cited: 'The church's mission (*missio ecclesiae*) flows from the realization that mission is first and foremost God's mission (*missio Dei*) and that the churches' calling to a holistic witness (*marturia*) should include the following dimensions: proclaiming the Word (*kerugma*), acts/services of love (*diakonia*), the forming of a new community of love and unity (*koinonia*), the zeal for a just society (*dikaionia*) and worship (*leitourgia*).' The statement from this workshop added: 'Mission is according to the Bible God's mission; as Father, Son and Holy Spirit God is the Subject of mission. In mission God has the salvation (*shalom*) of the world in mind and He will accomplish it through the realisation of his Kingdom. Mission gives expression to God's concern and plan of redemption for the world in all its dimensions. For this purpose, the Father sent his Son to the world to gather his church and send it into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. The very essence of the church as the body of Christ is to live a missional life in the world. The entire church and every believer in particular stand under God's commission, in dependence on and in obedience to the Holy Spirit.'

patterns of Christendom (shaped by power, privilege and nowadays consumerism) is challenged by the gospel. If this point is missed, a 'dark purple' Trinity still functions as a form of ecclesial self-legitimising. The proverbial elephant in the room of missional discourse is that of 'whiteness' in all its manifestations. If this is not addressed explicitly, then missional discourse in South Africa cannot stay true to its own roots.

### 3. A 'light purple' Trinity?

Purple is not only a long-standing ecclesial colour but also the official colour of International Women's Day, founded more than a century ago to promote better working conditions and voting rights. For the purposes of colour-coding, let me describe feminist discourse on the Trinity as 'light purple' (but not pink, of course, and not indigo, as this would tempt one to find the colours of the rainbow). One may say that dark purple (symbolising male authority) and light purple (the critique of patriarchy) could not be further apart.

You would know that there are by now quite a few books on the Trinity by prominent American or British feminist theologians, including Sarah Coakley, Grace Jantzen, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine LaCugna, Kathryn Tanner and, more recently, Linn Tonstad.<sup>17</sup> Four features are striking amid differences of emphasis, namely the focus on the immanent Trinity, the use of the social analogy (following the influence of Zizioulas, Moltmann and others), the critique of gendered assumptions, and an emphasis on inner-Trinitarian relations based on equality, mutual respect and reciprocity. In the South African context, these voices are echoed by feminist systematic theologians such as Marie Henry Keane, Almatene Leene, Sue Rakoczy, Janet Trisk and, more recently, Tanya van Wyk.<sup>18</sup>

My sense is that the move to inner-Trinitarian relations is probably necessary but that the substantive issues have to be addressed in terms of the economic Trinity, specifically the role of gender and power relationships in God's good creation and the need for emancipation from patriarchy. Naming God as Mother, Christa or Sophia plays a symbolic role but cannot suffice. I wonder what your position is in this regard, Rian? I presume that both of us follow Rahner's Rule, but that you are more eager than I am to delve into the mystery of the immanent Trinity. I think that many exponents of the Trinitarian renaissance still take a short-cut

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17 I added some references to these authors in the bibliography, just to be on the same page, as it were.

18 Again, I added some references to these authors in the bibliography.

without grappling with the hard problems posed by the economic Trinity.<sup>19</sup> Would you agree?

#### 4. A 'green' Trinity?

Most of the theologians attracted to the social analogy for Trinitarian discourse also see the ecological significance of relationships based on participation, equality and reciprocity. That applies to 'white', 'light purple' and 'brown' (see below) discourse on the Trinity alike. This is evident from the oeuvres of scholars who are otherwise as far apart as Leonardo Boff, Grace Jantzen, Elizabeth Johnson, Jürgen Moltmann, and John Zizioulas. A 'green' Trinity is especially evident in the work of Denis Edwards, who saw the Trinitarian bonds of love as inclusive of biodiversity. For example, in his book on *theosis*, entitled *Partaking of God*, he recognised the inclusion of all forms of life in the Trinitarian communion.<sup>20</sup>

In the South African context, such a green Trinity may be found in the work of Susan Rakoczy and Tanya van Wyk, mentioned above, but also in the doctoral thesis by David Field.<sup>21</sup> My own contributions to ecotheology recognise that only a deeply Trinitarian approach will do, but (following Van Ruler) I also emphasise the need to avoid inner-Trinitarian short-cuts and to follow the long route of doing justice to God's work of creation *and* of salvation – which is more easily said than done. This is best evident in my *The Earth in God's Economy*. (Thanks again for your most perceptive review of the book!) Likewise, it seems exceptionally hard to do justice to the work of both Christ and of the Holy Spirit, despite claims to the contrary. Ever since mediaeval debates on the *filioque*, this has been an issue that continues to divide Christianity, not least in South Africa.<sup>22</sup> In my *Om Reg te Stel*, I showed that those who are concerned with justification are less concerned with issues of justice, and vice versa. If so, there is no fully Trinitarian theology in sight yet.

#### 5. A 'brown' (or 'red') Trinity?

The tension between the green and brown agendas is obvious in South Africa. In cryptic terms, those adopting a 'green' agenda focus on nature conservation or preservation and endangered species, emphasise

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19 This is my argument in several essays (e.g. Conradie, 2013, 2019). I think you were present when I delivered that paper on 'Only a fully Trinitarian theology will do, but where can that be found?' at the IRTI conference in Potchefstroom in 2011.

20 See also Edwards's essay 'The diversity of life and the Trinity' (2004).

21 See Field (1996).

22 For a discussion, see the volume *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity in South Africa* (Conradie, 2013).

the problems posed by population growth, and claim to be non-anthropocentric but are critiqued for being misanthropic (not recognising the human victims of environmental degradation). By contrast, those following a 'brown' agenda focus on issues of social justice, and now also climate justice. They emphasise consumption more than population, and typically draw on the social ecology of Murray Bookchin, but are critiqued for remaining anthropocentric (interested in human well-being only). While the brown agenda typically critiques neoliberal capitalism, the position of the green agenda on industrialised capitalism is ambiguous. Just as a reminder: the colour brown comes from a mix of red and green, with various tints, of course. Internationally, the work of Latin American liberation theologians to promote the brown agenda is especially evident. The examples of Leonardo Boff and Yvone Gebara to hear 'the cry of the earth' together with 'the cry of the poor' may be mentioned.<sup>23</sup> Both of them (but Boff especially) articulate such concerns within a Trinitarian framework, also employing the social analogy. Boff famously said 'the Holy Trinity is our liberation program.'<sup>24</sup> After the fall of Soviet communism a 'Red' Trinity has become scarce except among a few remaining left-wing Barthians.<sup>25</sup>

In the South African context, there is considerable interest in the brown agenda, as is evident from three ecumenical documents, namely *The Land is Crying for Justice* (EFSA 2002), *The Oikos Journey* (Diakonia Council of Churches 2006) and *Climate Change – A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa* (SACC 2009). However, it is only Steve de Gruchy who made connections between the brown agenda and discourse on the economic Trinity. He famously called for an 'olive agenda' to integrate the brown

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23 See Boff's well-known *Holy Trinity, perfect community* (2000) and the chapter on 'Ecofeminism and the Trinity' in Gebara's *Longing for running water* (1999:137–172).

24 See Boff (2000:xvii): 'In it we find our program of liberation achieved to the infinite: difference and distinction, equality and perfect communion, and union of persons to the point of being a single dynamic, divine reality in eternal reproduction. Looking at the Trinity, we draw conclusions for our own social reality with a view to changing it.'

25 Do you know the work of Hans-Dirk van Hoogstraten and his proposal on 'deep economy'? He associates deep economy with deep ecology but also relates that to the economic Trinity. Here is a provocative formulation that may interest you: 'In terms of the Holy Trinity, we could say that the place of God the Father is taken by the economy, the place of the Son by politics, and the place of the Holy Spirit by ethics. The Son (politic, government) executes the will of the Father (economics, free market) and both send the Spirit (ethics, ideology) to the people. The Spirit provides social directives and ethical rules' (Van Hoogstraten, 2001:3).

and the green agendas.<sup>26</sup> It is a lovely image – even though I kept asking him whether he likes green or black olives best.

## 6. A ‘black’ Trinity?

You may well be asking by now: Where, then, may a ‘black’ Trinity be found? Is it not conspicuous in its absence? Would that mean that interest in the Trinity, at least in the South African context, is a ‘white’ or ‘purple’ prerogative? Does this not send serious warning signals regarding ideological distortions? I do think so and I am sure that this is something that is disconcerting, indeed disturbing, for you as well. What on earth should we make of this?

I am not using the term ‘black’ here in the sense of Black theology only. I am not using it literally either, for example, with reference to skin pigmentation – because no one is completely ‘black’ in that sense. I see myself as a Euro-African, namely an African who is predominantly (but not only) of recent European origin (recent if measured in hundreds of years; in hundreds of thousands of years, all humans are Africans). People who are termed African-American are Americans predominantly of recent African origin. Would you go along with that?

Let me then suggest that ‘Black’ may be used here for a variety of forms of Christian theology done by Africans of predominantly African origin, at least in terms of their self-description. These would include forms of African theology (for example, inculturation theology), AIC-theology, Black theology, decolonial or postcolonial theology, liberation theology, Pentecostal or Neo-Pentecostal theology, reconstruction theology and African women’s theology, of course with many partial overlaps and divergences.

In whatever way one looks at that, the paucity of contributions is striking.<sup>27</sup> Please help me to think through this. I think there is a range of positions that may be identified. On the one end of the spectrum there are evangelical theologians who affirm an orthodox position and then bemoan the absence of Trinitarian thinking in contemporary church life, despite the early African contributions by Athanasius, Augustine, Cyprian, Origen and Tertullian.<sup>28</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, there may be those who regard the Trinity as a colonial tool used to impose Western hegemony on theological discourse in Africa and to cast doubt on the continuity thesis.

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26 See De Gruchy (2007) and his posthumous volume of collected essays (2015).

27 See the helpful overviews by Vähäkangas (2000, 2002) and Sakupapa (2019).

28 See, for example the essay by Kunhiyop (2015).

This comes close to the heart of the matter: if one assumes personal continuity between traditional African notions of the Supreme Being, the Israelite naming of God as Yahweh and the Christian affirmation of God as the Father of Jesus Christ, how is the full divinity of Christ and the Spirit to be affirmed? How does one avoid subordinism?<sup>29</sup> Somewhere in the middle are inculturation theologians such as John Mbiti, Charles Nyamiti, John Pobee, James Kombo and Robert Agyarko who seek a way out by avoiding the Greek categories of *mia ousia* and *tres hypostases* and adopting African (anthropological) categories instead.<sup>30</sup>

My guess, albeit perhaps a biased one, is that there is such a deep intuition in 'Black' discourse on the Trinity that inner-Trinitarian shortcuts cannot resolve the problem. The focus must be on the work of God and in that sense on the economic Trinity, even if this remains mostly implicit. If so, the basic issue is how the message of salvation is to be understood, especially since the missionary messengers messed up the message so completely. Put cryptically, is salvation to be understood as liberation (or healing or exorcism), reconciliation or development?<sup>31</sup>

Don't you think it may be interesting to explore, from this perspective, the tacit assumptions about the Trinity in the oeuvres of diverse South African theologians such as Allan Boesak, Russel Botman, Manas Buthelezi, Siqibo Dwane, Bonganjalo Goba, Shun Govender, Simon Maimela, Thakatso Mofokeng, Itumeleng Mosala, Gabriel Setiloane, Buti Thlagale, and, most notably, Desmond Tutu? Surely, many other more recent scholars could be added to this all-male list. There are quite a few interesting projects for postgraduate students here.

Let me also affirm the project of my colleague, Teddy Sakupapa, who recognises better than most others what exactly is at stake. [I am sure you would appreciate the Zambia connection!] How, then, does one decolonise discourse on the Trinity? Or, as Teddy and I wondered, does the Trinity itself perhaps have a pervasive decolonising influence?<sup>32</sup> By naming God as intimate Father (and not Emperor or Caesar), as crucified Messiah (inaugurating the reign of *God*), as gentle Dove, Wind and Fire

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29 Rian, I note that you suggest that Charles Nyamiti may be the most consistently Trinitarian theologian in Africa (Venter, 2004b:760). The question to him is surely whether his ancestral Christology can overcome subordinism.

30 Again, I added some references to these authors to be on the same page.

31 These are three categories that I have been using together with several UWC students to reinterpret Gustaf Aulén's famous typology of atonement (the 'classic', 'Latin' and 'modern' types). See, e.g., Conradie (2019).

32 See Conradie & Sakupapa (2018), Sakupapa (2019).



(transforming the whole world), this cannot but hold a critique of Empire – but then through the vulnerable power of intimate love. Whether this can be called a ‘Black’ Trinity (only) is another question. Do you spot a touch of yellow (let us say, for the sake of the exercise, non-violent resistance), orange (fire) and blue (peace) in there ...?

## 7. A ‘grey’ Trinity?

The Jesus Seminar famously colour-coded biblical texts as red, pink, blue or black. Likewise, Norman Habel colour-coded the Hebrew Bible as ‘green’ (supporting ecojustice), ‘red’ (anthropocentric), and ‘grey’ (ambiguous).<sup>33</sup> Is there a ‘grey’ Trinity as well? That may well be what you get when you mix all the colours described above, ending up with white and black and thus with grey. I guess no one would wish to go there, but that may well be what you get when such discourses on the Trinity do not engage with each other. My fear is that this is the situation in which we find ourselves, at least in South Africa. As a result, ‘white’ and ‘purple’ discourses on the Trinity become esoteric, existing in narrow silos as a hobby of some professional theologians while the laity are scarcely interested. To make matters worse, the attempts to ‘green’ capitalism through notions of sustainable development, and the theological legitimation of that (for example, through the prosperity gospel), cannot but end up in grey confusion. Moreover, the heated theological discussions of our day, let us say around LGBTQIA+ matters, an evolutionary worldview, land restitution, vaccination, biblical authority, economic inequality, the prosperity gospel, climate justice and so forth (I am mixing them here at random) are scarcely shaped by a thoroughly Trinitarian theology, not even by a form of Trinitarian spreading.<sup>34</sup> In theory, a creative tension between these discourses can yield a rainbow alliance, but I do not see such a rainbow emerging. We may first need some rain for such a rainbow to arise ...

Moreover, I fear that our theological discourses have become arid, driven more by the agenda of ‘producing theology’ (through accreditable publications) as opposed to ‘doing theology’, ‘studying theology’, or ‘teaching theology’.

Rian, let me thank you for listening to these musings, for always being a willing conversation partner, for always adding a reference to

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33 See Habel (2009).

34 Although not naming it as such (as ‘Trinitarian spreading’), you clearly used the Trinitarian renaissance to reflect on themes such as mission (Venter, 2004), poverty (Venter, 2004), interculturality (Venter, 2008) and the city (Venter, 2006).



some interesting literature, for being a supportive friend. When I think of you, I hear you saying somewhere in a paper 'Ek lees dat ...'. I hope I have given you enough homework while sitting on the stoep, reading something, drinking coffee and hopefully, some red wine too.

With warm regards  
Ernst Conradie

PS: Knowing you, I presume that you may want to follow up on some of the publications that I hinted at above. I gave some details in footnotes and here is a list of such references:

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*Does Rian Venter Make (Theological) Sense?*

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# Speaking God Today

Rian Venter

## 1. Introduction

The Greek poet Archilochus tells the fable of the fox and the hedgehog: The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing. In our time, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin has used this simple story to mark one of the deepest differences between thinkers (1978:3). There are those ‘who relate everything to a single central vision, one system ... in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and, on the other hand, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory ...’. Arguably, in a time of many voices, systematic theologians should be hedgehogs – they are to know and speak of ‘one big thing’, namely God.

However, bringing God to human speech, referring to the final horizon of our lives and representing ultimate reality, has become for many a problematic task. Many convictions are real options – outright rejection, acceptance of uncertainty or even silence. This paper wants to address the *question* of *how* to speak God today? What grammar, as ground-rules for meaningful expression, must be employed? The basic belief is that responsible reflection, specifically also of God, cannot take place outside existing discourses. Our theological work is part of ongoing conversations: We learn from others, new possibilities emerge, and we are prompted to clarify ourselves. To address the central problem, *two related questions* should be framed: What can be learned from major developments in theology in the 20th century? And what are the implications of these shifts? *Three major theses* will crystallise which also clarify the task of systematic theology: one major development in the twentieth century can be identified – a new appreciation for the Trinitarian confession. This renaissance has wrought significant new perspectives for studying the doctrine of God and an expansive Trinitarian imagination has resulted from this.



## 2. Exploring the landscape of discourses

When we look into the previous century for wisdom, we encounter a weird irony, even a comical situation. Theology, in typical fox-like manner, has been busy with many other things. The noted New Testament scholar, Dahl, lamented in a programmatic essay *The neglected factor in New Testament theology* (1991) – God.

A group of well-known biblical scholars tried to redress this with a volume titled *The forgotten God* (Das & Matera 2002). Tracy (1994) aptly refers to *The return of God in contemporary theology*. The shift from neglect to renewed interest in the God-question by various disciplines in theology is a constructive development of the last three to four decades.

Within the purview of this limited space, the deeper dynamics cannot be pursued. May it suffice to refer at least to the *ambiguous character* of our time? In a recent analysis of the 20th century the French philosopher Badiou (2007:166) declares '[t]he God of monotheisms has been dead for a long time, no doubt for at least two hundred years ...'. Contrary to this, two journalists, Micklethwait and Wooldridge, chronicling the world-wide surging of religion, published a work called *God is back* (2009). Our post-secular era has a face we can hardly draw with coherence – singular labels and simplistic analysis do not exhaust it. For some, God is dead and for some, God is very much back! It seems as if theology has not escaped this very Janus-like character of our time. Tracy's (1987) naming of the present in terms of plurality and ambiguity is particularly apt.

This return to God is seen in at least *five major contemporary discourses*. Cognitive science of religion<sup>1</sup> and philosophy of religion<sup>2</sup> are pursuing interesting avenues to account for the divine as the result of human evolution and for understanding transcendence beyond the confines of classical theism. In Christian theology two major discourses

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1 Boyer (2001) and Tremlin (2006), for example.

2 Blondel (1998) and Boeve & Brabant (2010), for example. Noteworthy are reconstructions by philosophers such as Caputo (2006) and Kearney (2001 & 2010). The series of debates at Villanova University with scholars such as Derrida and Marion are instructive for this discourse; esp. Caputo & Scanlon (1999), Caputo, Dooley & Scanlon (2001) and Caputo & Scanlon (2007).

should be noted: intra-canonial theologies of God,<sup>3</sup> and theologies of the Other,<sup>4</sup> for example, class, race, culture and gender.<sup>5</sup>

The fifth<sup>6</sup> and major development came as a surprise: a Trinitarian renaissance, that is, a new appreciation of the centrality and importance of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. An astute chronicler such as Grenz (2004:6) views '[t]he renewal of Trinitarian thought that emerged as perhaps the greatest contribution of theology in the twentieth century'. Within the broader turn to religion, this renewed interest in the Trinitarian confession – that God is one and differentiated, as three persons, namely the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – should be intentionally and decisively considered when the question is addressed on speaking God today.

That which this so-called renaissance entails will be highlighted. A brief comment concerning development in human understanding of God may be appropriate. That which is underway in Christian thought could be labelled a third trajectory in the genealogy of God. The notion of 'a history of God' or 'the evolution of God'<sup>7</sup> is often articulated to convey that human understanding and conceptualisation of the divine is subject to historical conditions. At issue is a noetic development, not an ontic one, that is, a change in the 'being' of God. At least two crystallisations can be identified, namely: the shift from monolatry in ancient Israel to inclusive monotheism, definitely articulated by Deutero-Isaiah during the exilic period; and the shift from monotheism to substantialist Trinitarianism during the Patristic debates, culminating in the Council of Nicea (325). The question could be raised whether something radical has not taken place in the twentieth century – a shift to relational Trinitarianism. Dissatisfaction

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3 In bibliological studies there is a growing awareness of the variegated traditions and the kaleidoscopic manner of speaking by various layers of texts. For the OT, see the work by Brueggemann (1997) and Gerstenberger (2002) for example; for the NT, see Neyrey (2004).

4 Good overviews are offered by Kärkkäinen (2004) and Johnson (2007) of developments in Christian theology. See also Callen (2004) and Shults (2005).

5 Feminist scholars have raised the importance of language and its impact on social behaviour to critical consciousness. It is, however, not the focus of this paper to engage in discussions of alternative 'naming' of the Triune God. Classical treatments can be found in McFague (1987) and Johnson (1992).

6 Discussion among the various discourses is sadly absent, except for the fourth and fifth. Some Feminist, Liberation, and African theologians are expressly Trinitarians, for instance Johnson, Boff and Nyamiti (see Venter 2008c for a detailed treatment). Particularly disappointing is the compartmentalisation of intra-canonial and Trinitarian discourses.

7 See, for instance, the popular works by Armstrong (1993) and Wright (2009).

with classical theism is widely present today. The Hellenistic orientation, monarchical and hierarchical structuring and impassable character of this rendering of God have become for a significant number of scholars untenable, intellectually, but also biblically. The shift in modes of thinking from substantialist metaphysics to relationalist metaphysics has profoundly impacted the Christian doctrine of God. This will be further explained.

### 3. Mapping the Trinitarian renaissance

A comparison between the two major theologians respectively of the 19th and the 20th century – Schleiermacher and Barth – highlights the shifting fate of the doctrine of the Trinity. Relegating the Trinity to a conclusion in his dogmatic *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher (1928) epitomises a trend started long ago under the influence of the Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> For Barth, in his massive thirteen-volume *Church Dogmatics*, it belongs right at the beginning as part of the doctrine of revelation. By placing it in the first volume, he was aware of his deviating position, and his intention is clear, that '[i]ts content be decisive and controlling for the whole of dogmatics' (1975:300, 303).<sup>9</sup>

Rahner (1997) has perceptively described the slow demise of the Trinitarian confession. Particular noteworthy is his discussion of the structuring of the treatment of God – the order was from the one God to God Triune. His conclusion is devastatingly honest (1997:10f):

*[D]espite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists'. We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of the religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.*

Gunton (2003:6), also lamenting the 'forgotten Trinity', raises the discomfiting question whether the Trinity has 'really entered the bloodstream of the church'. Many Christians are 'practical modalists' (Letham 2004:5).

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8 Fiorenza (2005) in a recent and sympathetic treatment argued for the sophistication of Schleiermacher's discussion of God. Placing the Trinity at the end is not an appendix, but a conclusion. It functions to convey the distinctive experience of God's causality not as power, but as love (2005:176).

9 The stature of Barth continues growing with a burgeoning Barthian scholarship, and the sheer scale and artistry of his Trinitarian reflection keeps commanding attention. Cf. esp. the comprehensive new work by Habets & Tolliday (2011).

Much has changed in the last forty years. The sustained attention to Trinitarian reflection is undeniable and the stream of publications has become overwhelming. However, several good overviews do exist that are helpful.<sup>10</sup> The question which is pertinent here, and which should be addressed, is: *What is significantly new?* At least *five emphases* can be identified. Probably more than before, there is an ecumenical desire to rehabilitate belief in the Trinity as the very heart of the Christian faith (O'Collins 1999:1). The *very identity of the faith* is informed by this confession. Secondly, there is a deliberate 'economic re-centering of Trinitarian theology' (Sanders 2007:40), meaning that the economy of salvation is the ground and criterion of all knowledge of God.<sup>11</sup> The *identity of God* in Christian discourse can be construed only from the narratives of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the coming of the Spirit. Thirdly, the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity becomes the defining question (Kärkkäinen 2007:149, 2009:18), programmatically articulated in the so-called 'Rahner Ruler': 'The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity' (Rahner 1997:22). The 'point of Trinitarian theology' crystallises here: 'The biblical story of God and us is true of and for God himself' (Jenson 1995:42).<sup>12</sup>

Fourthly, with scholars such as Zizioulas and Moltmann, a significant *metaphysical shift* has taken place from substance to *relationality*. That God in Christian faith has revealed himself as three persons is taken with utter seriousness. Zizioulas's theology is an exposition of the work by the Cappadocian Fathers, which equates hypostasis with person and no longer with substance or essence. With this shift, 'essence' or 'nature' is understood in terms of personhood (2008:52ff). A bare divine substance does not precede the three divine Persons. This amounts to a new relational ontology – divine being should be viewed in terms of personhood, relationality and community. Identity, for instance of the three Persons, can be described only in terms of relationality (2008:57). 'Otherness' assumes greater prominence in Zizioulas's later theology – the Other is part of the person's identity and otherness is a condition for unity (2006:5). Moltmann's work has the same relational focus. He

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10 See esp. Kärkkäinen (2009), Kärkkäinen (2007), Grenz (2004), Marshall (2004), Van den Brink (2003) and O'Collins (1999).

11 Sanders (2007:35 & 48) stresses that the task of the doctrine of the Trinity is to describe the connection between God and the economy of salvation. This doctrine is the conceptual foregrounding of the entire matrix of the economy of salvation.

12 The exact meaning of 'immanent' and 'economic', and the precise relationship, is by no means a matter of consensus among theologians, See esp. Baik (2011) for at least seven positions in this regard.

is particularly interested in how theology construes the unity of God – dismissing approaches, which emphasise one nature, or one subject, or the monarchy of the Father. He interprets the unity in terms of unique communion between Father, Son and Spirit. ‘Person’, ‘relation’ and ‘perichoresis’ are fundamental concepts to his alternative – unity is constituted by ‘that inter-subjectivity which we call perichoresis’ (2000:317). He considers also his ‘perichoretic concept of person’ as an advance to a mere communitarian one. An interesting feature of his later Trinitarian theology is the importance accorded to ‘space’ – each Person is a ‘living space for the others’ (2000:318; see also 2010:164–169). This *social understanding of the Trinity*<sup>13</sup> is nothing but an exegesis of the Johannine saying that ‘God is love’, speaking the grammar of personhood, relationship, community and reciprocity. The turn to relationality is most of the time also accompanied by a turn to *pathos*. The work of Moltmann has come to epitomise this with his attention to the notion of suffering.<sup>14</sup> The logic of love is not the impassibility of being unaffected.

Fifthly, LaCugna’s programmatic statement at the beginning of her magisterial book on the *Trinity God for us* (1991) – ‘The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life’ – signals a major new development in Trinitarian theology. The Trinity must be generative for almost every aspect of theology. The doctrine of the Trinity is a ‘heuristic framework’ (LaCugna 1991:379) or a ‘regulative framework’ (Dalferth 1995:167) for thinking about God, the world, history and humanity. This conviction, shared among a vast array of theologians across the ecumenical spectrum, has become the stimulus for revisioning almost all doctrines and contemporary challenges. Trinitarian anthropologies and ecclesologies are found; proposals proliferate for thinking Trinitarianly on the problem of the one and the many, social life, gender relations and world religions.<sup>15</sup>

The *scholarly impact* of the Trinitarian turn has been particularly fruitful. A host of detailed studies on individual figures like Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Richard of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin and

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13 For a particularly good discussion of the entire development of social Trinitarianism, with clarification on exact meaning, dangers and advantages, cf Thompson (1997). He recommends the social analogy ‘as the best way to conceptually unpack the Christian vision of God’ (1997:41).

14 Moltmann’s work *The crucified God* (1974) has become a classic. See also his treatment of *Trinity and pathos* in 1981.

15 The Moltmann Festschrift *God’s life in Trinity* (Volf & Welker 2006) gives a good impression of the creativity and scope of contemporary constructions.

Edwards have been undertaken. Patristic studies are experiencing an unrivalled boom, with many traditional positions being reconsidered,<sup>16</sup> for instance the alleged divergence between East and West.<sup>17</sup> Confessional traditions are studied for their Trinitarian quality.<sup>18</sup>

Two particular targets are often the occasion for the renewed interest in the past – those critiquing Augustine and those employing the Fathers for social Trinitarian purposes.<sup>19</sup> Most of the time a deeper current informs these so-called corrective interpretations – aversion to and suspicion of social Trinitarianism and the wider application of Trinitarian theology.<sup>20</sup> The tensions between weak and strong Trinitarians are unresolved. The positions in the end will not be informed by detailed historical studies, but by decisions of conviction concerning the significance of God in theological discourse as such, and of the implications of the Trinitarian confession.<sup>21</sup>

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16 For a most informative overview of issues and new research, see Ayres & Radde-Gallwiz (2008). See also Ayres (2004).

17 See the seminal essay by Barnes (1995)

18 The Reformed tradition is an interesting example in this regard. Baars (2004) produced an extensive work on the Trinity in Calvin's theology. Van den Brink and Van Erp (2009), in a wide-ranging study of 20th and 21st century Dutch theologians, point to the conspicuous absence of these scholars from Trinitarian production and provocatively ask whether they are 'missing the boat'. The one exception they identify is Noordmans. Smit in a recent article (2009) believes there is a 'Reformed perspective' on the Trinity – he identifies several motifs, which constitute such a perspective. Referring to a wide international array of Reformed scholars of the twentieth century, he concludes that they are 'part of the much larger renaissance' (2009:76). Several impressions crystallise from his treatment: There is a reticence to discuss the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity; to explore creatively the practical significance of the Trinity; and to engage the problem of the unity of God as formulated by the social Trinitarians. What is absent from the discussion and what deserves careful study in future is the position of the Trinity in the overall treatment of God in the Reformed confessions, as well as the continuing influence of Augustine on subsequent history.

19 Gunton's (1997b:30–55), for example, blame of Augustine for the lamentable position of the Trinity in the West and Moltmann's use of the concept perichoresis.

20 For a typical example, see the recent critique of social Trinitarianism by Holmes (2009), who employs standard rhetoric focusing on the alleged misinterpretation of the past by social Trinitarians (see 2009:85f).

21 Interestingly, two major texts in the prestige series *The Cambridge companion to the Trinity* and *The Oxford handbook of the Trinity*, which will be published later this year, give extensive treatment to historical studies, and to contemporary application of Trinitarian theology.

#### 4. Venturing in/to a Trinitarian world

Jenson (2000:7) correctly states: 'The doctrine of Trinity is both the great *specificum* and the great task of Christian theology.' Having cursorily explored the turn to the Trinity in twentieth century theology, the *task ahead* should be clarified. The indicative of God's self-giving becomes inevitably the imperative of a theological response, that is, to speak this Trinitarian mystery.

I have deliberately chosen the language of adventure to convey a sense of what may be at stake. 'Adventure' evokes connotations of risk and danger, the possibility of discovery, but also of excitement and joy, and of the need for courage. Doing Trinitarian studies involves in a sense all of those.

*Speaking God today* involves *three reconstructive tasks* to be undertaken – a revisioning of understanding of the divine. Identifying the *who* of God can never be done in abstract isolation from a larger interpretation of life and of fundamental public issues. Because the doctrine of the Trinity has its origin in the history of God's dealings with human beings, the Trinitarian confession 'is an answer to the primordial question of man and mankind' (Kasper 1983:237). Thus, a Trinitarian identification of God implies a revisioning of ecclesial faith, as well as a revisioning of the public testimony of the Christian faith. This will be explored. At stake in the adventure of doing theology is what can be called an *expansive Trinitarian imagination*. Speaking God implicates Christian self-understanding and Christian public engagement. With this a *programme* for doing systematic theology in our time has also been delineated.

##### 4.1 Pronouncing God Trinitarianly

A conspicuous and unsettling feature of God-speak is the general assumption of certainty of what the reference entails – we know what we are referring to. To counter this 'domestication of the transcendence'<sup>22</sup> is arguably one of the great challenges of Christian theology. What do we refer to when we utter the word 'God'?

A particular fascinating and productive discourse is taking place in contemporary Philosophy of Religion, which could be fruitful for systematic theology. The figure of Heidegger and his charge of ontotheology looms large in the background.<sup>23</sup> God could become trapped by a specific

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22 See the work by Placher with the provocative title of *The domestication of transcendence* (1996). He points a blaming finger at Modernity and the marginalisation of the Trinity.

23 For a good discussion, see Westphal (e.g. 2004:15–40). He points to the concern to preserve alterity, to keep the subject from being reduced to an



metaphysics of being and causality, for example, that He is not different from the world. The work by the French Catholic philosopher Marion, *God without being* (1991), has exerted much influence. These scholars, mainly philosophers, sense the reality of idolatry as a particular danger. Johnston aptly titles a recent work *Saving God* (2009). In the debates, also with Derrida, a number of critical perspectives have been raised, which Christian systematic theology should take note of, the question regarding transcendence, gift, the impossible, and weakness,<sup>24</sup> for example.

To counter the perennial threat of domestication and idolatry,<sup>25</sup> the ‘*what*’ question should be framed as a ‘*who*’ and a ‘*how*’ question. Especially Jenson in his work on the Trinity (for example, 1997) has consistently emphasised the notion of ‘Triune identity’.<sup>26</sup> In a Christian sense, speaking God entails first and foremost narrating a history, it involves remembering the story of Israel, of Jesus and of the Post-Pentecost community. The ‘scandal’ at the heart of the Christian faith is exactly this particularity. Speaking God involves speaking the event of the three persons – Father, Son and Spirit – and their mutual relations and their relations with the world. The *doctrine* of the Trinity is second-order reflection, transforming narrative into ontological conceptualisation with a specific metaphysics.

The Trinitarian renaissance has made a major contribution to see this ‘identity- construal’ clearer. If the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, *who* is God? A Christian grammar<sup>27</sup> for speaking will employ language of *personhood*, of *relationality*, and of *love*. The theological work of the past few decades helps us to understand that the divine relationships, traditionally narrowed to relations of origin,<sup>28</sup> have particular qualities and should be described in terms of fecundity, gifting, ex-stasis, space-

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object. Ontotheology involves the sacrifice of divine alterity by allowing philosophy to make the rules (2004:16, 34).

24 See also footnote 752.

25 Christian theology has always been aware of the inherent difficulties involved in speech concerning God. The insistence on, for instance negative theology, apophatism, is well- known. For a thorough discussion, see Long (2009).

26 The identity of God can be construed only by a *dramatic narrative*. Jenson (1997:75) says, ‘God’s *identity* is told by his story with creatures’. ‘Identity’ is also Jenson’s alternative to the conventional ‘hypostasis’ (see 1997:106).

27 Ayres (2004:15), when discussing the doctrinal developments in the Early Church, has coined the useful notion of ‘grammar of divinity’. This refers to ‘a set of rules or principles intrinsic to theological discourse’ (2004:14).

28 Pannenberg (1991:319) makes in this regard a significant observation – viewing the Trinitarian relations exclusively in terms of origin is a defect



making, hospitality, generosity and pathos. This is the fundamental difference that a Trinitarian reconstruction makes.

The Trinitarian turn in theology has consequently generated a *specific metaphoric* world – it employs a world of community and relationship with a particular character. The underlying assumption is that this, in a more adequate manner than classical theism, represents the biblical traditions, remains faithful to Patristic sensibilities, and navigates more securely contemporary cultural challenges.<sup>29</sup>

Christian speaking constructs a linguistic world, which invites habitation and practice. Trinitarian speaking creates its own unique space.

The great outstanding theological challenge should be recognised, namely a Trinitarian reconstruction of the *attribute tradition*. The typical and conventional order in dogmatic books placed the discussion of the attributes before the Trinity of which the impact was obvious – a mere generic discussion, informed by an abstract theism. Several theologians have seen this dilemma and challenge clearly<sup>30</sup> – the attributes should be attributes of the Trinitarian God. Two ramifications have emerged; for instance, speaking about the power of God entails an interpretation of power along Christological and pneumatological lines. This could result in an entirely different conception of power, that is, power in terms of weakness and self-giving. A rethinking of classical attributes such as simplicity, impassibility and immutability, which have been determined by a metaphysics of perfect being, is obviously on the theological agenda. A fascinating question to be explored is whether a Trinitarian sensibility would not generate new attributes. Barth (1957:464ff, 650ff), for example, explores space<sup>31</sup> and beauty in his intricate Trinitarian treatment of the divine perfections. A critically important and incomplete task emerges in this regard. Classical theism with its concomitant structuring of the doctrine of God and treatment of the attributes is a strange hybrid: First a generic notion of God is stated and then a Christian notion is added.

The Triune God is the *hidden* God. In the economy of salvation this God has revealed his true face to us – this is *what, who* and *how* God is.

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of traditional Trinitarian theology because it does not allow *reciprocity* in the relations.

29 Cunningham (2003) concedes that relationality makes more sense to postmodern sensibilities. However, he is at pains to demonstrate that a Trinitarian notion of relationality functions as powerful critique to postmodern conceptions of personhood in individualistic and privatised terms (2003:199).

30 Gunton (2003) offers a thorough discussion of the problem.

31 See Venter (2006) for a discussion of Trinitarian space and its possible practical significance.

But this revelation does not exhaust the mystery of God, it deepens the mystery, thus it is the revelation of the hiddenness of God.<sup>32</sup> ‘Hiddenness’ is not in the first place a description of the epistemic limitations of man – it represents the identity of the Triune God. However, it is not a word that condemns to silence. It is a word that enables speaking (Kasper 1983:129), but the narratives of divine self-giving in creation and salvation will always display a surplus of meaning. Our Trinitarian naming of this God in our doctrinal discipline of systematic theology can never be closed. Closure is domestication and idolatry. Trinitarian ‘hiddenness’ explicates the fecundity of the Father, the kenosis of the Son, and the freedom of the Spirit.<sup>33</sup> Differently put, ‘hiddenness’ tells the story of love – of the plenitude and generosity of this God. In the end, hiddenness is the *narrative of salvation*. The adventure of systematic theology is speaking this inexhaustible mystery of love of the Triune God.<sup>34</sup> This is ‘the revolution in the understanding of God’ (Migliore 2004:81) that the Christian faith offers.

#### 4.2 Articulating a Trinitarian identity

The sacrament of baptism as Christian initiation is a practice of identity-formation. The baptised person is gifted with the strong name of Father, Son and Spirit. *Who God is, signifies who we as Christians are.*<sup>35</sup> Butin (2001:1–12) perceptively starts his book on Trinity with a discussion of the baptism. Baptism has always been connected with confession, and ancient ecumenical creeds are Trinitarianly structured. Thinking of baptism, identity, confession and Trinity together has decisive implications for systematic theology.

Systematic theology’s task is to think and speak in a systematic manner about the action of this God. It should *coherently* represent the

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32 See Berkhof’s (1993:57–60) excellent treatment of ‘De openbaring wijdt ons in in een grote verborgenheid’ (1993:58). For good discussions of the hiddenness of God cf Barth (1957:179–204), Kasper (1983:123–130), Jüngel (1983:250–255) and Jenson (2000).

33 Jenson (2000), in viewing the hiddenness of the Triune God as the ‘impenetrability of God’s moral agency’, correctly points out that a predicate of God should consider various roles of each divine Person. He connotes Son to suffering and – noteworthy – Spirit to future and freedom.

34 The treatment by Jüngel (1983) of the speakability of God, Trinity and love deserves careful attention. Remarkably, he says, ‘To think God as love is the task of theology’ (1983:315).

35 See Venter (2008a) for an in-depth exploration of the impact of God-images and the responsibility of systematic theology in this regard.

*economic* work of the Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>36</sup> The great drama of creation, salvation and consummation should be interpreted in light of the unity of the Triune God. Vanhoozer (2005b:779) fittingly speaks of 'faith seeking theodramatic understanding'.<sup>37</sup>

The speaking-adventure of *systematic theology as academic discipline* requires some scrutiny; it is exactly at this juncture in the argument when ecclesial identity is discussed. My proposal is that the *possibility*, the *task* and the *character* of systematic theology should be informed by the very identification of God as Triune – the subject matter must inform understanding of this discipline.<sup>38</sup> Systematic theology should speak the Christian God – no other discipline has this responsibility. The act of speaking is made *possible* by a prior act of communication by the Triune God. Human beings can be speech agents, because God has reached out and communicated with the human. This created the possibility of human consciousness, and of linguistic symbolising capacity. The contribution of Vanhoozer was to develop a theological anthropology in terms of personhood, relationality and communication informed by a Trinitarian understanding of God (see 1997:175–184). He states that 'Trinitarian theology provides ontological grounding for the notion that personal being is being-in-communicative-relation' (:186). The unique and specific *vocation* of systematic theology as discipline is to speak the Christian understanding of God. Gunton (1997:18) puts this clearly: 'The dogmatic task ... is to articulate its specific object, the being and the action of the Triune God.' This primary task of systematic theology obviously implies the consideration of traditional norms and sources of theology. At stake here is to view this task in consistent Trinitarian terms. Often the question of the *character* of the dogmatic activity is neglected. The reality of the specific identification of God should not only be the controlling task, but also the informing influence of the nature of the activity. Informed by

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36 Gunton in several articles (e.g. 1998, 1999) has emphasised the nature of 'systematic' as coherence, and the economic structuring of the contents of systematic theology.

37 In his magisterial *The drama of doctrine* Vanhoozer (2005a:100–112) develops the notion of doctrine as 'theodramatic direction'.

38 Recently Webster (2007) calls attention to what he labels 'theologies of retrieval' – a cluster of theologies with broadly similar judgments concerning the nature of systematic theology. Noteworthy here is the conviction that the 'source of theology is thus its norm' (2007:584). There is wide reaction to Modernity which alienated theology from her subject-matter. He points to the decay in Christian thought about God, and the need for 'doctrinal expansion' of specifically the Trinity (2007:594f).

Christ as Logos, systematic theology will value rationality,<sup>39</sup> and informed by the incarnation, systematic theology will be contextual. Informed by the Spirit, systematic theology will be imaginative<sup>40</sup> and pluralising.<sup>41</sup> Much of theologising exudes a character so foreign to the God she should represent – it is violent in its argumentation, inhospitable to new ideas, ossified in its language.<sup>42</sup> Gaybba (1988) beautifully writes of ‘love as the lamp of theology’ and refers to the Trinity and the kenosis (1988:34). In a context riddled by conflict of interpretation relating to many issues, what this may imply remains an outstanding task.

The unsettling irony of systematic theology is that the presentation of God’s work in the traditional ‘loci’ has not always been done Trinitarianly, but has been in the grip of a generic, mostly Hellenistic, God. Only in recent years with the Trinitarian renaissance, has the imperative of consistent Trinitarian revisioning been appreciated. Much work has already been done<sup>43</sup> and proposals on for instance Trinitarian anthropology and ecclesiology<sup>44</sup> deserve careful attention. The challenge for systematic theology is to consolidate advances of the last decade and explore doctrinal areas, which have not been adequately revised Trinitarianly,<sup>45</sup> such as ontology, providence and eschatology, for example.

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39 Williams understands systematic theology – its order, comprehensiveness, rationality and coherence – as making explicit the fundamental rationality and relationality associated with the Trinity. He refers to ‘theology’s mimesis of the subject’ (2009:52).

40 See Venter (2004a) for a discussion of the notion of a *Trinitarian imagination*.

41 Cunningham (1998:270ff) identifies ‘pluralising’ as one of the Trinitarian practices. The eternally ‘pluralising Triune God’ calls for oneness and difference at the same time 1998(:271).

42 See Venter (2007:214ff) for a discussion of this applied to intra-ecclesial rhetoric and polemic.

43 See Metzger (2005) for a good collection, for example. The work by Hunt (2005), albeit somewhat one-sided in its Roman Catholic orientation, gives a fine overview of Trinitarian theology and its many applications.

44 See Grenz (2001) on the human being and Volf (1998a) on the church, for example. See Venter (2004b) for a specific ecclesiological revisioning – *mission Dei* as *missio Trinitatis*.

45 How this is to be undertaken is not entirely clear. Ironically, a plethora of work has been done, with a paucity of explicit theorising on methodology. See Venter (2010a) for a proposal in this regard. The suggestion is that God can function discursively in a variety of ways. Three primary functions are identified – agency, mimesis and heuristics. God is the Living One who acts; God’s life could be a model to be echoed; God as principle solves critical problems. Much more research needs to be done to clarify how Trinitarian theology should be conducted.

Revisioning of Christian doctrines is not merely an academic venture – *ecclesial identity* is at stake. If ‘the doctrine of the Trinity is an anticipatory sum of the whole content of Christian dogmatics’ (Pannenberg 1991:335), which is celebrated in the initiation at baptism, the rethinking of each dimension of the work of the Triune God – from creation to consummation – has determining influence on the formation of the ‘ecclesial self’.<sup>46</sup> The grammar of the Triune God – such as relationality, community and generosity – guides doctrinal exposition of creation, providence, salvation, church and the end. Doctrines construct hermeneutically a ‘Trinitarian world’, which fundamentally shapes relational selves – selves who echo the identity of the Triune God.

## 5 Intimating a Trinitarian public contribution

God is, according to Jüngel (1983), the ‘mystery of the world’. God is the broadest possible horizon for speaking on the subject of origin, meaning and destiny of our universe. Efforts by secular reason to portray God as a private affair, or as an oppressive or exclusionary reality should be resisted. The academy and the society as publics are to be addressed when theology speaks to God. For *Christian* theology this implies viewing ‘the Trinity as public truth’ (Newbigin 1997) – it can only speak this God to our time. Doing public theology in South Africa has become a serious theological task and scholars such as Koopman (2007) also advocate a Trinitarian approach. The challenge for systematic theology is to expand the Trinitarian imagination to address questions of *truth*, *goodness* and *beauty* with its contextual manifestations. I suggest that the questions of *agency*, *alterity* and *experience* may require sustained attention in our context at this time. This asks for some clarification.

The intense debates during the Darwin celebrations are indicative of a much bigger question: Can science adequately and exhaustively account for the complexity of life, without religion as conversation partner? This may be one of the most urgent and fundamental questions of our time. The growing emphasis on interdisciplinary and the science–theology dialogue gives evidence to the importance of this. In this limited space it may be necessary to highlight the critical challenge for theology – *to account for divine agency*. Clayton (2005:345) states without hesitation, ‘Permeating all science–theology debates is the question of divine action, which may represent science’s single greatest challenge to .theology,’ Traditional approaches and answers, which assume a monarchical relationship between God and the world and allow for divine ‘interventions’ have become

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46 See Grenz (note 822) 96f) for this insightful formulation. A fundamental quest for a *relational ontology* surfaces in Grenz’s work.

for many less than satisfying. The massive twenty-year project on Divine Action by the Vatican Observatory and the Berkley Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences conveys a sense of the depth of the problem, and the need for new theological thinking.<sup>47</sup> Various theologians have pointed out the potential of a Trinitarian approach to make a productive contribution.<sup>48</sup> Renowned physicist and theologian Polkinghorne (2004:61) is of the opinion that 'a deeply intellectually satisfying candidate for the title of a true 'Theory of Everything' is in fact provided by Trinitarian theology'.<sup>49</sup> Trinitarian theology opens possibilities to speak on divine agency in a more nuanced and diversified manner. Apart from a fundamental relationality underlying all reality, patrological, Christological and pneumatological resources articulate notions such as fecundity, kenosis and freedom, which address challenges such as contingency, suffering and emergent complexity. The Triune God is infinitely creative, generously spacious and inexhaustibly gifting. This leaves freedom for creaturely becoming, but also for creaturely suffering. A Trinitarian conceptualisation of divine agency holds the promise of speaking apologetically more effectively, and theologically more faithfully to the biblical witness. A consistent Trinitarian approach to divine agency unlocks avenues to pursue the science-theology dialogue more constructively and mutually enriching.<sup>50</sup>

Questions of race, reconciliation and justice are major unsolved issues in South Africa. One possible approach could be to view the perennial challenges in terms of the common denominator of alterity or otherness. Social pathologies, such as discrimination, alienation and violence are fundamentally an inability to deal with otherness. The painful question for religion, theology and churches are whether they are constitutive of the problem or whether they contribute any unique resources to the public discourse. One possible way for Christian theology to make a substantial contribution could be to frame the issue in terms of *otherness*, *identity* and *Trinity*. Final reality – God – for Christians is a community of ex-static love, and at the same time the identity of the Father, Son and Spirit presupposes otherness and community. Normatively, humanity

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47 See the sixth and concluding volume (Russell, Murphy & Stoeger 2008) for an overview of the project and critical findings.

48 An excellent example that discusses the relation between Trinity and science, See Shults (2006). Various scholars, prominent in the faith-science dialogue, such as Clayton, Edwards and Peacocke, have emphasised the centrality of the Trinity.

49 In a recent work edited by Polkinghorne (2010) theologians and natural scientists discuss in-depth matters of relationality and the possibility of a Trinitarian ontology.

50 See Venter (2009) for a more detailed discussion.

should 'echo'<sup>51</sup> something of this. Arguably, no theologian has made more productive proposals in this regard than the Croatian, Volf. His notions of a Trinitarian construction of identity, the embrace of the Other and a 'catholic person' require careful attention.<sup>52</sup> Critically important in Volf's relevant social ethics is his appreciation of theology as creating a 'normative space' shaped by adequate beliefs in God (see 2002b). Trinitarian theology could facilitate the formation of inclusive selves, which allow space for the Other in our own identity and of creating communities of embrace and hospitality.<sup>53</sup> Much of twentieth century discourses on otherness, for instance by Levinas, Ricoeur and Derrida, despite their sophistication, lack the perspectives that Trinitarian theology could bring. Trinitarian theology generates possibilities to think of diversity, community, generosity, self-giving and inclusion at the same time.<sup>54</sup>

The global turn to spirituality and the growth of Pentecostalism, with the concomitant decline of traditional churches, have come as a surprise to many. An astute observer such as Cox (1999:139) is of the opinion that a transformation of religion is underway as adaptation to the conditions created by Modernity. The category 'experience' has come to dominate attempts at defining spirituality.<sup>55</sup> Serious theological studies, for instance, by Charry (1997a), also blame Modernity for the divorce of doctrine from life. She (1997a:235) points out how truth, goodness and beauty formed a unity in classical thought and were considered as affective. She pleads for spiritual formation by the Trinity as answer to the spiritual crisis of our time (1997b). This may be one of the urgent public tasks of Trinitarian theology, namely, to address the spiritual need in a Trinitarian manner – that is, to *invite to fellowship and participation* with the Father through the Son in the Spirit. Several important studies have already indicated the means for this.<sup>56</sup> This may also create possibilities

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51 Various metaphors are used to convey the analogous manner of speaking, for instance Ware (2010:125) speaks of becoming 'icons of the Trinity' and Gunton (1997b:78) of 'echo'.

52 Volf advanced these Trinitarian views on social ethics in various work, see 1998b & 2002a for example.

53 The icon by Rublev, *The Trinity*, represents exactly this quality of the Trinity – the hospitality offered to strangers by Abraham. See also Vosloo's (2004) significant work on Trinity and hospitality, for example.

54 Ibid..

55 See Venter (2008b) for an application of this to the challenge of interculturality.

56 Schneiders's (1989:684) definition has greatly impacted the academic discipline of spirituality: 'The experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms of ... self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives'.



to connect the life of faith, beyond cognition and morality, to aesthetics.<sup>57</sup> The simultaneous turn to spirituality and to the arts<sup>58</sup> is not incidental.

The hunger for experience and the need for imaginative expression are intricately linked. Worship and beauty are joined at the hip. Jenson (1995:33), when discussing the Trinity, rightly says, 'The doxological character of the church's liturgy is response to God's *beauty*'. Interestingly, a theologian such as Barth (1957:655), when discussing in a unique manner beauty as part of God's perfections, explicitly employs affective language, namely 'joy, desire and pleasure' – Triunity, beauty and joy belong together. Contemplating the life of the Triune God in its astounding beauty,<sup>59</sup> transforms speaking to prayer and action to art. The vision of God's glory promises healing to the nations.

The Trinitarian confession offers resources to theology to make a meaningful public contribution. It unlocks human faculties to think, to act and to celebrate. The adventure of doing theology is to speak the ultimate Source of all truth, goodness and beauty to social questions of agency, otherness and experience.

## 6. Conclusion

Speaking God today is not only a response to the global religious turn, but it especially signifies assuming the task constitutive of the discipline of systematic theology. An array of discourses on God issues a challenge to Christian theology to account for her grammar. The ecumenical re-appreciation of the Trinitarian confession is by all accounts a crucial development, which has reinvigorated Christian speaking. New sensibilities have emerged which allow for meaningful revisioning of God, and consequently of Christian identity and Christian public engagement. A relational God who lives in ex-static self-giving, creates Christian communities of hospitality and generosity, and offers a healing vision of

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57 From a vast growing literature, only a few examples can be mentioned: LaCugna & Downey (1993), McIntosh (2005) and Sheldrake (2010). These scholars emphasise the difference that a re-visioned Trinitarian spirituality can make. The spiritual journey is not so much inward, as relational – towards greater intimacy with God and with others; it overcomes traditional divides, for instance between contemplation and action; and it is primarily informed by self-donation.

58 For this new theological interest in the arts, see Dyrness (2007) for example.

59 The contribution by Edwards is crucial. Arguably more than any other theologian, he explored Trinity, beauty and experience, See Venter (2010b). In a major new study on Trinity and beauty, Hart (2003:177) points out that beauty 'is an infinite "music", drama, art, completed in ... the termless dynamism of the Trinity's life'.



truth, goodness and beauty to the world. Speaking the Triune God extends the promise of the benediction, 'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Spirit be with you all.'

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