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The Trinity in Contemporary Theology: Questioning the Social Trinity

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Introduction

I undertake this paper with some fear and trepidation. Now it is appropriate for anyone to approach the doctrine of the Trinity with fear and trembling because of the very nature of the topic. But I do so for a number of additional reasons. For one, this study calls into question the insights of some of the theological giants of our time: Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg. For another, I share much in common with the futurist theological approach of Pannenberg and Moltmann; indeed, Wolfhart Pannenberg is my *Doktorvater*, and I owe him a profound debt of gratitude for his theological insights and personal guidance. Furthermore, I very much appreciate some aspects of the work of the social trinitarians. I wish in one sense that I could find the foundations for those concepts in the Scriptures and in the doctrine of the Trinity as intended and developed by the early church fathers. Perhaps most unsettling for me is the thought that these insights of our brilliant contemporary theologians are correct, and I am simply unable to grasp them.

Nonetheless, with fear and trembling I dare to raise questions about this social understanding of the Trinity, certainly the most prominent and profound development in trinitarian thinking today. There are, to be sure, a variety of issues relative to the Trinity that are currently under discussion and development, such as whether the doctrine is even relevant in our time, whether the trinitarian language is so sexist as to render the doctrine useless in its present form, whether a renewed trinitarian vision can bridge denominational boundaries. However, in my judgment, the issue of the social Trinity includes of necessity engagement with many of these issues, and is the common denominator for virtually all contemporary trinitarian explorations, and therefore can serve to introduce us to the general issues surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity.

I raise my concerns about the social understanding of the Trinity because for a long time, as this understanding of the Trinity has become more and more dominant in theology, I have had a sense of dis-ease with it. Something in my understanding of the Trinity does not sit right with these new developments, and so I have had to examine them more closely. In so doing,

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I have felt confirmed in being at least sufficiently suspicious of the validity of some aspects of these approaches to raise them with you.

My reflections are very much of an exploratory nature, and I will presume to do no more than raise some questions concerning this contemporary social approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, and propose the possibility of some alternative perspectives. Furthermore, I do so cogniscent of the very real possibility that my thinking is misguided, my understanding clouded, and my questions inappropriate in the face of much more profound theological insights. Nonetheless, given all of these disclaimers, I shall begin with an overview of some of the major figures in contemporary trinitarian thinking, and then add my own questions and constructive observations regarding the social or communitarian conception of the Trinity.

I. The Social Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity has experienced a powerful reemergence in modern theology, in contrast to its relative neglect in nineteenth-century theology. True, Hegel did develop a philosophical trinitarianism, which has had a significant impact upon contemporary trinitarian thought. But it is generally recognized that the groundbreaking efforts of Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics*, which treats this doctrine as prolegomenon to and structural motif for his entire theological project, were in sum the major impetus for the new train of thought regarding the doctrine of the Trinity.[1]

The rise of interest in the Trinity, however, is particularly significant because of its chief expression in the social model of the Trinity. Most theologians trading on this approach to the Trinity maintain that it is rooted in the trinitarian theology of the church fathers, particularly the Eastern or Greek Cappadocian fathers. The basis for the current resurgence of the doctrine of the Trinity is a reevaluation of the concept of "person." Whereas classical theology, it is claimed, has understood "person" in a substantial sense, as individual separate from communal relatedness, contemporary

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[1]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I, bk. 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 2nd edition, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 299.

trinitarian thinking concludes that "person" has more to do with relationality and communion than with divine splendid isolation.[2]

The shift from trinitarian substantiality to relationality has been so widespread that virtually all theologians today tend to agree that the ancient ontological understanding of God needs to be reconceptualized. The key element in revising substantialist or Aristotelian categories for understanding the Trinity is to be found in the affirmation of the principle of relationality. God needs to be reconceived as relational; the idea of person-in-relationship is almost universally assumed.[3] This trend toward a social model of the Trinity has brought together traditionally very diverse theological schools, such as feminist and liberationist, evangelical and process theologians, all of whom in their ways deem the social Trinity as the best way of understanding God. Indeed, John Gresham's survey of the variety of contemporary theologians espousing the social trinitarian view results in his claiming: "This provides the strange sight, in the pluralistic world of contemporary theology, of Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, liberation, feminist, evangelical and process theologians agreeing on a particular trinitarian model of God!"[4]

Our first task, then, is to give an overview of some of the major explications of the Trinity in contemporary theology that have moved us into the present avalanche of social trinitarian thinking. As was noted at the outset, Karl Barth's work is considered to be one of the two most influential forces in the rise of our current wave of social trinitarian theology. As Ted Peters suggests in his book *God As Trinity* (82):

> The major contributors to the contemporary rethinking of the doctrine of the Trinity either extend principles already proffered by Barth or else follow lines of thought that parallel his Church Dogmatics. Most specifically, they rely upon the priority of revelation-analysis and Barth's belief that the historical event of Jesus Christ belongs to the becoming of God proper.

Barth treats the Trinity in close connection with the concept of revelation, seeking to make clear that the doctrine of the Trinity develops out of a revelational rather than a philosophical or ontological basis. In moving from

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[2]In this survey of contemporary trinitarian theology I am indebted to Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 2001); and John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.)

[3]Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in the Divine Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 34.

[4]John Gresham, "The Social Model of the Trinity and Its Critics," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 327.

the economic to the immanent Trinity, he avoids any speculative approach to this doctrine; every aspect of the faith must be grounded solidly in the triune revelation of God. In his revelational trinitarianism, Barth set the stage for the ensuing discussion of the relationship between God revealed in the economy of salvation and God within the eternal divine life *in se*.

As for how we are to conceive of the three members of the Trinity, Barth holds that God can have only one personality, for if Jesus Christ were a personality different from the Father, He would not be the Father's self-revelation.[5] He therefore suggests abandoning the term "person" to refer to the members of the Trinity, because that word inevitably implies "personality," in the sense of three centers of consciousness individualistically conceived, which would amount to tritheism.[6] Barth prefers the Cappadocian terminology of three mutually related modes or ways of being of the one God. He connects God's personhood or subjectivity with the divine substance or "ousia" rather than with the three "hypostases."

Barth holds that within the inner divine being there is relationship; God is not alone, but rather in the simplicity of His essence He is threefold — Father, Son and Holy Spirit, mutually related, loving one another eternally.[7] This immanent trinitarian relationality is then reflected in the community of God and man in Jesus Christ, in the believing community of faith, and in the co-partnership of people in society and as male and female.[8] Thus the understanding of the Trinity as relational illuminates our human relationships, which are created by God to reflect His own being, the *imago dei*.

Karl Rahner is the other major modern theologian credited with bringing the doctrine of the Trinity to the fore once again, in a new and relevant fashion, working out of the Roman Catholic tradition. Like Barth, he had difficulty with the traditional language, which in his view has an effect on our understanding of the content of the doctrine. He is critical of using "person" in an individualistic, modern sense. He follows kerygmatic and salvation history in seeing the persons of the Trinity as three distinct manners of subsisting.[9] Subsistence in his view involves distinction, particularity, concreteness, and relationship. He wishes to make clear that each manner of subsisting within the Trinity has a distinctive character while at the same time the three manners reveal to us the true being of God.

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[5]Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I, 1:350.
[6]Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I, 1:351, 355.
[7]Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III, bk. 2, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 218.
[8]Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, 132.
[9]Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), 109.

Rahner is perhaps best known for his formula "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity," often referred to as Rahner's Rule.[10] Rahner works with a salvation-historical or *heilsgeschichtliche* approach to theology, and seeks to articulate his theology over against the Roman Catholic neo-scholasticism in which he was trained, but which in his view rendered the doctrine of the Trinity irrelevant to Christian faith and contemporary theology.[11] In Rahner's view, the neo-scholastics (following Thomas Aquinas himself) had so separated the divine unity from the divine threeness that the former could be expounded upon without reference to the latter. Furthermore, the Trinity doctrine as a whole could be developed without reference to the revelation of the three persons in salvation history. In failing to reckon sufficiently with the trinitarian divine work in the economy of salvation, the neo-scholastics suggested that any of the trinitarian members, not only the Son, could have become incarnate.[12] They stood at the end of a long process in Western theology that began with Augustine and was elucidated by Aquinas, according to which the threefold activity of God in salvation history was separated from the threefoldness of God in eternity. In so doing, they speculated upon the intertrinitarian relations apart from any reference to the salvation-historical activity of the three persons.

This in effect replaced the Christian understanding of the incarnation of the Logos with the view of a generic God becoming human. Rahner sees this as separating God-in-eternity from salvation history and rendering the incarnation superfluous to God's inner being, which then remains unaffected by it. This risks eliminating any true self-communication or revelation of God to humans within history.[13] In response, Rahner tries to understand just what it means to say that it is the Son who is incarnate in Jesus, as well as to indicate the significance that the role Jesus plays in salvation history has for the place of the Son in the divine inner-trinitarian life.

Rahner's theological project would seem to raise significant questions about the traditional doctrine of the immutability of God. If God *in se* is the same as God in His salvation work, then this in turn suggests that God changes in and through His relations with history. Rahner answers by distinguishing between God changing in His divine being and changing in another; God

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[10]Rahner, *The Trinity*, 72. The designation of Rahner's methodological principle as "Rahner's Rule" is attributed by Ted Peters to Roger E. Olson. See Peters, *God as Trinity*, 213, n. 33.

[11]See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Introduction," in Rahner, *The Trinity*, viii, for Rahner's engagement with neo-scholasticism.

[12]Rahner, *The Trinity*, 11.

[13]Rahner, *The Trinity*, 99-101.

created the human creature so as to be a proper vehicle for God's own becoming-in-self-expression.[14] In assuming human nature, God can "become" while in Himself remaining immutable.

While Rahner sought to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity through his unique formulation, his Rule still leaves room for interpretation of what it entails. It is understood by Ted Peters to mean that the relationality God experiences through Christ's saving relationship to the world is constitutive of trinitarian relations proper. God's relations *ad extra* become God's relations *ad intra*.[15] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, on the other hand, suggests that the identity of the economic and immanent Trinity is the complete giving of God's self to the creature; what is given in the economy of salvation is God as such.[16]

Some theologians have objected that no strict identity can be posited between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. LaCugna, following Walter Kasper, replies that Rahner intended his axiom to be seen as providing a methodological rather than an ontological insight.[17] She explains, "the order of theological knowledge must adhere to the historical form of God's self-communication in Christ and the Spirit. Knowledge of God takes place through Christ and the Holy Spirit, according to the order (*taxis*) of the divine missions."[18] Trinitarian theologians since Rahner have sought to treat with utmost seriousness the epistemological link between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity.

In fact, some theologians since Barth and Rahner have taken their insights in the direction of reconceiving the relationship of time and eternity, so that what happens in the history of salvation becomes epistemologically and even ontologically constitutive of the content of eternal life. Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, two of the foremost trinitarian theologians of our time, are convinced that an historical understanding of the Trinity facilitates a necessary move away from the focus on the one divine subject that still held sway over the work of Barth and Rahner.

Moltmann begins with the cross of Christ; for him the cross is not only the event that effects human reconciliation with God, but also constitutes God's self within history as the Triune God. For Moltmann, the basis of the Trinity lies in the separation-in-unity that God experienced within the divine life in the event of the cross. As Jesus surrendered Himself on the cross to suffer

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[14]Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 220.

[15]Peters, *God as Trinity*, 96.

[16]LaCugna, "Introduction," xiv.

[17]Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 276.

[18]LaCugna, "Introduction," xv.

godforsakenness, the Father likewise experienced the anguish of being separated from the Son, yet in the process both entered a new unity in the Spirit. He explains, "What happened on the cross was an event between God and God. It was a deep division in God himself, in so far as God abandoned God and contradicted himself, and at the same time a unity in God, in so far as God was at one with God and corresponded to himself."[19]

Contrary to classical theism, God for Moltmann is not immutable. Because the historical event of the cross is constitutive of God's eternal being, God not only affects the world but also is affected by it, above all by humankind. If one conceives of the Trinity as an action of love in the suffering and death of Jesus, then the Trinity is no self-contained group in heaven, but an eschatological process open for men on earth, stemming from the cross of Christ.[20]

At the same time, Moltmann rejects the idea that God and the world are inherently interdependent, such as one might find in process theology. The historicity of God is God's free and gracious choice from eternity to go outside of Himself; in God, "necessity" and "freedom" are transcended by God's own nature, which is love. Moltmann bases this approach on his novel understanding of creation as an act of divine self-limitation that began already within the divine life, which he terms "trinitarian panentheism."[21] In order to create a world "outside" Himself, God must have made room in advance for a finitude in Himself. God created within the infinite divine reality a finite "space" and "time" for the world, by "withdrawing" Himself from that space and time, marking it as "godforsaken" space, which He enters in time through Christ, and redeems through the cross from its godforsakenness.[22]

Moltmann uses the image of "perichoresis" to describe the divine unity, referring to the intimate indwelling and complete interpenetration of the persons in one another. In contrast to the patristic approach which begins with impersonal philosophical terms, he argues that the Bible reveals three persons at work, not one. Hence an understanding of the Trinity must begin

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[19]Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 244. While Moltmann's rhetoric here, as often in his writings, is interesting homiletically or existentially, it is not particularly heuristic systematically. "God against God," if understood in any logical, systematic theological sense, would have to make God a plural God, and Moltmann's trinitarianism indeed guilty of charges of tritheism; furthermore, any appeal to "paradox" is simply begging the systematic question. The Ps. 22 context of Jesus' cry on the cross makes any kind of strong, "ontological" separation of God from God inadmissible, for it is the cry of one who, in his suffering and feelings of abandonment, is likewise fully aware of and dependent upon the merciful dominion of God.

[20]Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 249.

[21]Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 98-103.

[22]This image of "godforsakenness" harks back to the work of Barth.

with the fellowship of a plurality of persons, understood as three centers of conscious activity, and only then progress to the question of their unity. He characterizes his approach as a "social doctrine of the Trinity."[23] For Moltmann, all interpretations of the Trinity that reduce the three persons to modes of a single subjectivity inevitably set God over against the world and imply a hierarchical, monarchical relation between them.

Moltmann's critique of classical monotheism and his social doctrine of the Trinity are therefore not simply abstract theory, but have implications for human social and political interaction. He sees traditional monotheism as being used to justify political and ecclesiastical totalitarianism, and so is critical of hierarchical power structures.

The practical application of his social Trinity finds its expression in human fellowship, equality, and interdependence. The doctrine of the Trinity is accordingly a "critical principle" for theology in its mission of transforming the world. Moltmann urges a rediscovery of what he considers the biblical concept of God's triunity as the community and fellowship among three equal persons, rather than a monarchy of one person over the others and the world. Only by focusing on the distinct subjectivities of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can a doctrine of God be developed that is characterized by mutuality rather than lordship. For Moltmann, the eschatological kingdom cannot be a universal monarchy of the Lord of creation, but rather a harmonious fellowship of liberated nature and humans with God. Moltmann's trinitarian thinking has deeply influenced liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff, as well as feminist thinkers such as Elizabeth Johnson.[24]

The most comprehensive expression of a trinitarian theology rooted in the connection between God and history, to which Barth gave impetus and that Moltmann nurtures, is to be found in the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg. This doctrine plays the central role in his three-volume magnum opus, *Systematic Theology*.[25] With Moltmann and following Barth, Pannenberg seeks to ground the Trinity on God's self-revelation in Christ, that is, on the way that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit appear and relate to each other in the event of revelation in the life and message of Jesus.[26] Only after this does he treat the

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[23]Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 19; also 150, 174-176.

[24]See Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 205-209.

[25]Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991-1998).

[26]Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I:299.

unity of God found in the divine attributes. His understanding of the immanent Trinity thus flows from the economic Trinity. He agrees with Moltmann that the traditional attempts to derive the plurality of the trinitarian persons from a concept of God as one being is problematic, because God remains a single subject rather than three persons.

Pannenberg moves directly from the concept of revelation to the Trinity; he looks to Jesus' relationship to the Father, especially in his message of the Kingdom of God, for an understanding of Jesus as the Son, and of the Spirit as a third person who is different from while being bound to the Father and the Son.[27] The doctrine of the Trinity in this approach becomes the explication of the relationship of Jesus to the Father and the Spirit.

Pannenberg reinterprets the traditional understanding of the term "self-differentiation" within the Trinity. Rather than referring, as it does in the fathers and classic trinitarian formulations, to the bringing forth of the second and third persons through the Father, which implicitly gives priority to the Father, Pannenberg understands self-differentiation as a giving of oneself to one's counterpart, and thereby gaining one's identity from the other—this being in fact the essence of personhood. "Person" is thus a correlative or relational term, for self-differentiation involves dependency on the other for one's identity. Applied to the trinitarian persons, one must conclude that the mutual self-differentiation and interdependence of Father, Son, and Spirit constitutes the concrete form of the trinitarian relations.[28]

Concretely, Jesus differentiated Himself from the Father, subordinating Himself to the Father's will, and so gave place to the Father's claim to deity, while gaining His own identity as the Son. For Pannenberg, this is not simply a statement about the earthly Jesus; in Jesus' glorifying the Father's deity, the relationship between Jesus and His Father belongs to the eternity of God, God's immanent being. Similarly, to complete the Trinity, he observes: "as Jesus glorifies the Father and not himself, and precisely in so doing shows himself to be the Son of the Father, so the Spirit glorifies not himself but the Son, and in him the Father."[29] Hence the mutual and reciprocal relations among the trinitarian persons define the divinity of each person as a *received* divinity; each receives divinity as a person-in-relationship with the other two.[30]

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[27]Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I:304.

[28]Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I: 308-319.

[29]Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I: 315.

[30]Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1980), 2:110.

Foundational to God's self-differentiation in Pannenberg's theology is the concept of God's being, which is His deity, as linked inextricably to His rule over the world. "God's being is His rule," Pannenberg asserts, in a dictum now labeled Pannenberg's Principle.[31] He argues:

> To believe in one god means to believe that one power dominates all. . . . Only the god who proves himself master over all is true. This does not mean that God could not be God apart from the existence of finite beings, for God certainly can do without anyone or anything else. It does mean that, if there are finite beings, then to have power over them is intrinsic to God's nature. The deity of God is His rule.[32]

This threeness of the trinitarian persons serves as the basis for Pannenberg's understanding of the oneness of God. He distances himself from the psychological approach which dominates the Western tradition from Augustine to Barth, with its focus on God as the divine subject, because it insulates a supposedly immutable God from time and history. The concept of mutual self-differentiation implies that the three trinitarian persons are independent centers of action and not merely different ways in which the one divine subject exists. This likewise eliminates the traditional tendency to gain divine unity by reducing the persons to relations of origin in the one Godhead, as reflected in the traditional terms "generation" and "procession."

Without the kingdom, God cannot be God. Thus the Godhood of the Father depends on God's eschatological reign. Yet the coming reign of God is dependent upon the sending of Jesus into the world and the work of the Spirit who anticipates the reality of the kingdom in the world. Hence the deity of the Father is dependent on the other two members of the Trinity, and the category of relation is therefore not external to, but inherent in, the divine being. Indeed, the divine essence is ultimately "the epitome of the personal relations among Father, Son and Spirit," which relations unfold throughout the course of the history of the world. At the same time, Pannenberg (along with others) cautions that enthusiasm for the social model of the Trinity not degenerate into tritheism. The doctrine of the Trinity does not propose that God is three persons who have relations, but three subsistent relations that are, in fact, persons.

This concept of interpersonal or relational personhood, expressed in Eastern theology in terms of "being as communion," has therefore emerged as a

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[31]Roger E. Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 199.

[32]Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 55.

dominant principle in contemporary trinitarian theology, providing as well a point of connection between theology and anthropology. The Eastern theologian John D. Zizioulas, mainly through his collection of essays *Being as Communion*, has been very influential in promulgating the idea that the divine being is constituted by the communion of the three trinitarian persons.[33]

Catherine Mowry LaCugna in particular has appropriated this concept of being as communion perhaps most innovatively and influentially of any Western theologian in her book *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*.[34] In her analysis, post-Nicene theologians separated *theologia* from *oikonomia*, and concentrated on the former, resulting in a one-sided theology of God that had little connection with the economy of salvation in Christ and the Spirit, with incarnation and grace, and therefore had little to do with the Christian life.[35] Theology must realize that rather than an economic and immanent Trinity, there is only the *oikonomia*, which is "the concrete realization of the mystery of *theologia* in time, space, history and personality."[36] Her ontology of personhood, reflecting Zizioulas' language of *ekstasis* and *hypostasis*, holds that to be a person is to be both open beyond oneself, and to embody the totality of one's nature. Thus every human person uniquely exemplifies humanness, just as each of the three divine persons uniquely exemplifies deity.[37] A theology that works out of our experience of salvation leads us to conclude that "God's way of being in relationship with us" is in fact God's personhood, for "God for us is who God is as God."[38]

LaCugna perceives the difference in the Greek and Latin traditions, in their affirmation of communion as the nature of reality, to be in their application of the ontology to the divine reality. The West focused on the communion of the three persons as an occurrence within the eternal divine reality, whereas the East situated the mystery of the communion of the three within the divine economy. The effect of the Latin approach is to predicate God's attributes to the divine essence, rather than to the divine persons. Here she sides with the Greek tradition. Thus immutability is a characteristic of the divine personhood, meaning that God is unchangeably personal. Likewise the

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[33]John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians 4 (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

[34]Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

[35]LaCugna, *God for Us*, 210.

[36]LaCugna, *God for Us*, 223.

[37]LaCugna, *God for Us*, 290. This example is reminiscent of S. Basil; see Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 25.

[38]LaCugna, *God for Us*, 304.

incomprehensibility of God is freed from the substantialist ontology which ties it to a divine substance that lies beyond the limitations of the human mind. Rather it means that as person God is "indefinable, unique, ineffable," just as all persons are. What is truly worthy of being called incomprehensible is the "unfathomable mystery of a God who comes to us through Christ in the Spirit."[39] For LaCugna, the Greek patristic trinitarianism, by focusing on monarchy as a property of a person and not a substance, opened the way for it to be communicable to and shared by more than one person. This in turn has far-reaching social implications for her, for it promotes mutuality and undermines all hierarchical structures among humans.

This brief overview of current trends in trinitarian theology should make abundantly clear that the psychological model has given way to variations on the theme of divine sociality or community. This ascendancy of the focus on the three trinitarian persons has in turn opened the way to an understanding of what it means to be human in which the triune life becomes the final touchstone for speaking about human personhood.[40] LaCugna summarizes the impact of this renewal of trinitarian theology: "The doctrine of the Trinity ultimately must measure its reflections on personhood by the revelation of divine personhood in the face of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit."[41]

II. A Critique of the Social Trinity

(1). In reflecting critically upon the current trinitarian scene, I must first acknowledge the value and magnitude of these modern insights into the doctrine of the Trinity.

(2). Certainly the rediscovery of the historical nature of the Trinity recaptures the biblical dynamic of the God who acts, over against the more static substantialist explications of God in the scholastic tradition.

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[39]LaCugna, *God for Us*, 301-303. Of the theologians discussed above, LaCugna most clearly seems intent upon stripping away any transcendent reality of God in favor of a totally kenotic or economic understanding of God as social or communal Trinity—so much so that even the Orthodox theologian Michael Hryniuk, who is otherwise sympathetic to LaCugna's approach, issues the caution: "Theological re-conceptions of the doctrine of the Trinity are obviously necessary, but they ought not be too quick to discard the inner life of the Trinity with the bath water of sterile speculations that may have historically surrounded it" (Michael Hryniuk, "Triumph or Defeat of the Trinity? An Eastern Christian Response to Catherine LaCugna," *Diakonia* 33 (2000): 25-26).

[40]Grenz, *Social God and Relational Self*, 57.

[41]LaCugna, *God for Us*, 292-293.

(3). The approach to understanding God through God's self-revelation in history, acknowledging that we can in fact only know God through His revealing of Himself in time and space, is critical for any theological project.

(4). The insights into the inextricability of the immanent Trinity from the economic Trinity, if to be sure not their total identity, carry great practical as well as theological weight.

(5). The renewed emphasis upon the personal character of God in relationship to us, God's intimate engagement with humanity and the world through God the Son incarnate in the flesh, is highly commendable, in contrast to any speculative, abstract efforts to define God apart from our human experience. Our Christian theology must speak of a God who is indeed relational, who relates to real people in a real world, a God who understands our human condition from the inside.

Thus there is much that is commendable in these newer social trinitarian theological programs. Nonetheless, there is also something in these proposals that cause me to question whether they are indeed concordant with Scripture and the intent of the church fathers as they framed the trinitarian doctrine, or whether in fact they are working with more contemporary concepts of persons and relationships and are reading into the doctrine of the Trinity their own agendas or insights into the faith. I will explicate my questions or concerns from the following perspectives.

First, I want to affirm a number of "personal" elements in the understanding of the Trinity. The Triune God is a *personal* God, in the fully modern sense of being both a distinct, individual center of consciousness and potential for action, and a being-in-relationship who in fact chooses to live out His being in His relationship to creation. Furthermore, God has chosen to become a distinct *personality* in the incarnation of the Son in Jesus the Christ. Jesus was a full human being with a full personality just like all humans, meaning that He was characterized both by *ekstasis* and *hypostasis*, an openness beyond Himself and a distinctiveness within Himself. Indeed, the Christology of the fathers took pains to maintain the full humanity of Jesus Christ in the incarnation, over against Docetism in all its forms.

Also, I recognize and affirm the *personal relationship* between the Father and the Son in the incarnation. The human, incarnate Son relates very personally to God as His personal, loving Father, and the Father affirms the Son incarnate as His beloved one, in whom He is well pleased. Both the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds make clear that in the economy of salvation there is a type of "progression" or "development" in God. According to His divine nature, the second person of the Trinity, who is incarnate in time in Jesus, is recognized as having been the Son *persona* of God from all eternity. The

gracious and redeeming dimension or aspect or face of God which we know through God's self-revelation in Christ has always been characteristic of God eternally, in His essential being; He is the only-begotten or solely generated unique Son of the Father, identified in the incarnation with the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet in this unique incarnation the Son *persona* of God subordinates Himself and is obedient to His heavenly Father, self-limiting of Himself in time and space in His various human characteristics.

As initially and continually in His creation, so also now in His incarnation, God chooses to be self-limiting according to His human nature, expressly for the sake of revealing His gracious and unconditionally loving character which alone can save us and redeem all creation. Correlatively, in the historical dynamic of the economic Trinity, the Father is superordinate over the Son as human, while obviously participating equally with the Son in the personal divine reality which is self-revealing in the *persona* of the Son incarnate.

Likewise the Spirit is another *persona* of God, proceeding from the Father and the Son in the economy of salvation. The life-giving Spirit is associated especially in and through the self-revelation of God in Christ with the sanctifying power of God at work in the world for the sake of reconciling all humanity to God. While participating fully in the divine reality, the Spirit is distinguishable in Its work in the economy of salvation as a particular *persona* or face or activity of the one God, the one divine reality.

Thus we come to an understanding of God as three *personae* or *hypostases* in the patristic sense, active in the history of the world for our salvation in three distinctive ways or forms. We cannot know and experience this God except through His self-revelation in history, hence as economic Trinity. But we must remind ourselves that the doctrine of the Trinity was first and foremost developed to maintain the full divinity of the Son, for unless the Son were true God, fully participating in the divinity of God, He could not be our Savior. I question whether the trinitarian formulations of the fathers as expressed in the creeds were intended to communicate a tri-personal or social understanding of the deity in the modern sense, such as we have heard expressed above, in which three distinct and separate personalities are in some fashion not only economically but eternally three subjectivities mutually interrelating, as being-in-communion. The fathers, in my estimation, were far too sensitive to the charge of tritheism to have risked an understanding of God such as we hear expounded today in the concept of the social or communal Trinity.

I think the test case of this problematic is to be found particularly in the *persona* of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is indeed one distinct *persona*, one distinguishable dimension or operation of the personal divine *ousia* or essence. Furthermore, the Spirit is the ongoing presence and power of the

personal God in the world and its history, the divine "Intercessor" or "Mediator" form of God with us following the Ascension of Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is clearly not of the same "personal" character as the Father and the Son; It does not stand in the same kind of parallel or analogous "personal" relationship to the Father or the Son, as do the Father and the Son to one another. Yet our creeds, reflecting the thought of the fathers, do affirm that the Spirit participates every bit as much in the divine reality as the Father and the Son; while it is not "personal" in the same sense as the other two, the Spirit is nonetheless designated as being every bit as much a distinct *persona*, parallel to or analogous to the other two divine *personae*. Therefore the term *"persona"* and the meaning it is intended to carry in describing the Trinity *cannot* be equated with some self-conscious interpersonal center of action envisioned by the social trinitarians, and as exemplified in the incarnational interpersonal relationship between the Father and the Son. And while the Son *persona* and Spirit *persona* may be seen as somehow subordinate to or derivative from the Father *persona* in the economic trinitarian sense, at the same time that the Father is dependent upon the *personae* of the Son and Spirit for His economic role or activity — such that I can agree with Pannenberg that the history of the world becomes the history of God[42] — still, I question the necessity of concluding from this that the immanent Trinity must be understood socially, interpersonally in its essential or eschatological reality.

I am asking whether it could be possible for God economically to be relational, and indeed in the relations between the Father and Son to be incarnationally interpersonal, and yet to acknowledge that this relationality has to do with the creation and the incarnation *economically*, and does not warrant being read into the divine personal being of God *in se*. Certainly we can only know God *in se* through the God *pro nobis*, for us in His economy of salvation, but I am not sure that this truth warrants or issues logically in our describing God immanently as three equal interpersonal, social, communitarian entities.

What I sense in the social trinitarian approaches is the tendency to see God the Son who was incarnate in time as *eternally incarnate* in relating to the Father, hence an *immanent* dynamic of Father/Son relations. To be sure, retroactively we know that the God who was incarnate as the Son of the Father always was the kind of personal, loving God who included in His reality the desire and capacity for relationship, and thus the capacity for creation of a world and of a humanity in His image, to which He could relate. But the actual Father/Son nexus *only* became meaningful through the

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[42]Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* I:327.

incarnation in time, where the divine Logos or Son as humanly incarnate becomes revelatory of divinity as loving Father. The human Son reveals God as supremely gracious divine Son, that is, as the eternally redemptive dimension of God *in se*, who since the incarnation we know as the redeeming Son. We dare not succumb to the ancient heresy of "dividing the substance"[43] of the immanent deity by envisioning a subdivision *in se* of the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying personal qualities of the one God apart from the operations of the economic Trinity in the salvific history of creation.

Actually, the definition itself of God as ultimate personal reality would seem to necessitate the oneness of God immanently, rather than allowing for any substantive, ousianic plurality or relationality in the Godhead. The latter would seem to move unavoidably toward some kind of tritheistic understanding of divinity. I am thus far inclined to think that it would have appeared so also for the original framers of the doctrine of the Trinity. While they may not have expressed their awareness of the dynamic personal character of the divine Nature in the way in which modern trinitarian theologians are rightly doing, the Cappadocians, upon whom the social trinitarians depend for their support in the early church fathers, are very concerned to maintain the oneness of the *ousia* of the divine Nature or divine operations over against the distinction of the three *hypostases*. Further, the fathers disavow any plurality in the Godhead, maintaining that the *personae* or *hypostases*, while enumerated as three, cannot in analogy to three human persons be carried into the understanding of the "absolutely simple and indivisible substance" of the one divine nature.[44] While the emphasis in the Cappadocians seems to be more on the separate subsistence of the three *hypostases* than on the one *ousia*, they themselves explain the Trinity as one indivisible Godhead, one identity of nature, operating in the three modes of being, or *hypostases*. Their distinctions among the *hypostases* do not seem to correlate with contemporary efforts to explain the trinitarian persons as bound up in a communion of individual self-conscious agents.

I would agree with those trinitarians who reject the concept of the Trinity as different ways of existing of the one divine, absolute impersonal subject, according to some sort of a psychological model of Trinity. Certainly God in His essence is personal, and personal-in-relationship to humanity in creation. But that the mutual self-differentiation in the Godhead, which the fathers did assert, implies three independent, personal centers of action in eternal

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[43]Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, editors, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 24:4.

[44]J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960), 263-269; Schaff and Wace, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 23-29.

relationship with one another as in some sense plural entities, would seem to extend decisively beyond the bounds of the intent of the trinitarian doctrine, and invite us to embrace some type of personalistic tritheism. Pannenberg does not want the enthusiasm for the social model of the Trinity to degenerate into tritheism, but I am not sure how that can be avoided in the social Trinity schema.

I believe the contemporary social trinitarians, quite commendably, desire to see the doctrine of the Trinity become relevant to practical Christian life; accordingly, they wish to find within the very essence of God the model for appropriate human relationships of fellowship, mutuality, and love. And that these kinds of relationships are the trinitarian God's desire and destiny for humanity I have no doubt. I am also certain that God fashioned us for such relationships, and actually lived them out in His incarnational presence among us through the Son. But this does not seem to warrant identifying God as social *in se*, and may even be seen to obscure the nature of God as essentially one.

To be sure, we are privileged to know what is most important for us to know about the immanent God, because of His choice to reveal Himself to us in time. We also recognize that if God had not done what He in fact did — create a universe and a unique humanity within it, incarnate Himself for our eschatological salvation, work in us to give us faith, hope and love — if He had not done what He did, He would not be who He is . . . or perhaps in more appropriate Hebraic terms, would not be who He will be, Yahweh. Possibly the most telling argument against equating the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity is the fact that, as futurist theology argues, God is indeed historical, and thus in His ultimate reality will be known as God only eschatologically, only at the end in His actual eschatological kingly rule. Our confidence, based upon God's decisive self-revelation in Christ, is that *then* we will know that God *always was* the kind of God whom we now know proleptically through the economic Trinity. I would therefore suggest that perhaps a better way to understand the relationship of the economic to the immanent Trinity is to say that the immanent Trinity is the eschatological Trinity, and the economic Trinity is the prolepsis of the eschatological Trinity. It seems clear to me that when stated in historical terms, equating the historical (economic) Trinity with the eschatological (immanent) Trinity simply does not fit either Scriptures or the trinitarian formulations of the fathers and the creeds. Many beside me suspect that this would seem to entail precluding the freedom and true historicity of God.

I appreciate the observation of Ted Peters that "what happens in time contributes to the content of what is eternal. This applies to God as well as to the world. God's trinitarian activity in temporal history becomes constitutive

of the divine eternity. The redeemed creation is drawn up into the eternal life of God through the eschatological consummation. This is what salvation means."[45] However, if the eschatologically immanent Trinity is indeed one God, then God's history in and with the world, while constitutive of His reality, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the *personae* of the one Triune God in time, while to be sure economically distinguishable, are somehow also socially, communally related in history, something like a continuing committee of three celestial persons working out the identity of the one God. If God of necessity must be one logically, and will be known to be one eschatologically, then it makes sense only to affirm our historical and economic experiences of God as aspects or operations of the one personal God's self-revelation in dynamic relationship with us and the world.

I would therefore lean toward an understanding of the Trinity not as social or communitarian, but rather as dynamically personal and proleptic. It seems to me that this loving personal God is working out His salvific purposes in history through what I would prefer to call His three *personae*, not to confuse His threefoldness in eschatological unity with some sort of social or personalist tritheism. But I offer my critique and these suggestions regarding the social Trinity only as tentative and provisional, and hope that at least I have spurred your thinking about this doctrine sufficiently to cause you to reflect critically upon your own understanding of this most crucial doctrine of the Christian faith, and how it actually relates to the life of those whom you teach and prepare for lives of service.

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[45]Ted Peters, *God – The World's Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 109.