

Introduction

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When people seek to know God, and bend their minds according to the capacity of human weakness to the understanding of the Trinity; learning, as they must, by experience, the wearisome difficulties of the task, whether from the sight itself of the mind striving to gaze upon light unapproachable, or, indeed, from the manifold and various modes of speech employed in the sacred writings (wherein, as it seems to me, the mind is nothing else but roughly exercised, in order that it may find sweetness when glorified by the grace of Christ); such people, I say, when they have dispelled every ambiguity, and arrived at something certain, ought of all others most easily to make allowance for those who err in the investigation of so deep a secret.

—Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity*, Preface to Book 2.¹

The doctrine of the Trinity has been enjoying a striking “revival” for several decades. Any eighteenth- or nineteenth-century theologian would probably be astonished if she or he could witness all of the recent publications on this topic. Things looked very different back then. According to Immanuel Kant,

. . . [the] doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, has *no practical relevance at all*, even if we think we understand it; and it is even more clearly irrelevant if we realize that it transcends all our concepts. Whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the Divinity makes no difference: the pupil will implicitly accept one as readily as the other because he has no concept at all of a number of persons in one God (*hypostases*), and still more so because this distinction can make no difference in his rules of conduct. On the other hand, if we read a moral meaning into this article of faith (as I have tried to do in *Religion within the Limits* etc.), it would no longer contain an inconsequential belief but an intelligible one that refers to our moral vocation.²

1. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Arthur West Haddan and William G. T. Shedd (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: T&T Clark/Eerdmans, 1993), 3:37 (trans. rev.).

Theological doctrines that have no implications for the conduct of our lives have become irrelevant, according to Kant. In order to salvage a theological theme such as the Trinity, one would have to show how it pertains to the moral life, to practical reason. As Friedrich Schleiermacher famously wrote, “this doctrine itself, as ecclesiastically framed, is not an immediate utterance concerning the Christian self-consciousness, but only a combination of several such utterances.”³ The most important nineteenth-century thinker on the Trinity was arguably G. W. F. Hegel, who was not a professional theologian, *stricto sensu*, but a philosopher. Yet Hegel had a deeper sense for the importance of trinitarian thought than most theologians of his time. He criticized August Tholuck, a well-known Pietist theologian and professor at the University of Halle who had published a historical study on early trinitarian constructs, for his lack of real understanding of what is at stake and what comes to expression in trinitarian theology:

Does not the eminent Christian knowledge of God as the Triune merit a completely different respect than merely to ascribe it to an externally historical process? Throughout your essay I could neither feel nor find a trace of your own sensibility for this doctrine. I am a Lutheran, and through philosophy I am all the more confirmed in Lutheranism. I will not permit myself to be satisfied with external historical explanation when it comes to such basic doctrines. There is a higher spirit there than merely that of such human tradition. It is an outrage to me to see these things explained in a way comparable to the lineage and dissemination of silk manufacture, cherry growing, the pox and so forth.⁴

2. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties (Der Streit der Fakultäten)*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 65–67.

3. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 738 (§170). Does such a sentence, and the locating of trinitarian doctrine as a sort of “appendix” (Claude Welch), represent a marginalization of trinitarian doctrine? No, according to Paul J. DeHart, in his insightful article: “*Ter mundus accipit infinitum*. The Dogmatic Coordinates of Schleiermacher’s Trinitarian Treatise,” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 52 (2010): 17–39.

4. “Verdient die hohe christliche Erkenntnis von Gott als dem Dreieinigen nicht eine ganz andere Ehrfurcht, als sie nur so einem äusserlich historischen Gange zuzuschreiben? In Ihrer ganzen Schrift habe ich keine Spur eines eigenen Sinns für diese Lehre fühlen und finden können. Ich bin ein Lutheraner und durch Philosophie ebenso ganz im Luthertum befestigt. Ich lasse mich nicht über solche Grundlehre mit äusserlich historischer Erklärungsweise abpeisen. Es ist ein höherer Geist darin, als nur solcher menschlichen Tradition. Mir ist es ein Greuel, dergleichen auf eine Weise erklärt zu sehen, wie etwa die

Hegel took issue with a purely descriptive study of trinitarian doctrine, as if such doctrine could be reduced to a mere “human tradition.” What mattered to him was the “higher spirit” that comes to expression in it. Even a deeply committed, pastoral Christian theologian such as Tholuck had been unable to become personally involved in the subject matter he had researched. And so it is not through theologians, but through a major figure in German idealist philosophy, that the doctrine of the Trinity was actualized in the nineteenth century, before a few theologians reappropriated it later in the same century (e.g., Isaak August Dorner) and much more broadly in the twentieth century.

The twentieth century can be seen as the century of a rediscovery of trinitarian thought in at least two ways. First, one might interpret this twentieth-century rediscovery as following a vaguely trinitarian pattern. Around the turn of the century, a specific kind of theological liberalism, represented by Adolf Harnack, focused on *God*; in this reading Jesus does *not* belong in the gospel he proclaimed. After World War I, starting in the 1920s and 1930s, a *christocentric* approach dominated the theological landscape, led by Karl Barth and his friends. It was only in the latter part of the century that a renewed interest in the *Holy Spirit* became noticeable, through a flood of publications. And so, in a kind of Joachimite interpretation of twentieth-century Christian theology, one may discern a trinitarian pattern: it all began with “God,” continued with a christological concentration (“the Son”), and ended with a strong pneumatological accent (“the Spirit”).⁵

This Joachimite reading may be a little too neat to be fully convincing (liberal theology prior to World War I, for instance, was already often christocentric), but it seems to contain a grain of truth. But the weaknesses of this reading leads us to the second reason for this twentieth-century rediscovery of trinitarian thought. Despite their christocentric emphases, both Karl Barth and Karl Rahner displayed a decisive trinitarian impetus—since the 1930s in Barth’s case, a little later for Rahner—that had a tremendous influence on (and beyond) their own respective churches—Reformed and Roman Catholic. Barth, in particular, was not simply a “christocentric” theologian. Rather, he wished

Abstammung und Verbreitung des Seidenbaues, der Kirschen, der Pocken u. s. f. erklärt wird.” Letter to August Tholuck, July 3, 1826, in Rolf Flechsig, ed., *Briefe von und an Hegel*, 4 vol., ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1961), 4:29. Quoted in Eberhard Jüngel, *God as The Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 90 (trans. rev.).

5. See Martin Leiner, “Der trinitarische Rhythmus der Theologiegeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert. Ein Vorschlag zur Strukturierung der Theologiegeschichte und seine Konsequenzen,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 56 (2000): 264–97.

to be seen as a trinitarian theologian, namely someone who focuses on the Son as the Father's Son who is active in and beyond the Christian community through the Spirit. This full commitment to trinitarian theology is true also of the following generation of thinkers, such as Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Eberhard Jüngel. Many of the contemporary theologians who write about the Trinity are, in one way or another, indebted to these thinkers, even as they move beyond them or combine various elements from several of them.

The principal aim of the present volume is to highlight and to evaluate some of the main discussions about trinitarian theology within the contemporary anglophone theological literature, in particular as regards three main questions:

1. THE ECONOMIC AND IMMANENT TRINITY

How should one articulate the relation between God's immanent trinitarian life (what the Greek Fathers called *theologia*) and the "economy," namely the history of God's act in relation to the world? The debate is never likely to be resolved between, on the one hand, those who wish to preserve a difference between God in God's own life and God's act *ad extra* (toward what is not God), and, on the other hand, those who, without collapsing the two, see a decisive correspondence or even unity between the two. Karl Rahner's well-known basic axiom—"The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity"⁶—is an important guideline for the latter group of theologians. The former group is keen to preserve God's freedom not only *for* the world but also *from* the world, and so questions the adequacy of Rahner's axiom, especially of the second part, in which he identifies the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity.⁷ This book postulates that talk of a "unity" and "correspondence" between God's life and God's action toward the world is warranted, without collapsing the two's unity or identity. Both defenders and critics of the idea of a unity between the immanent and the economic Trinity can find support in Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Barth, in his

6. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad-Herder, 1997 [1970]), 22; "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte," in *Die Heilsgeschichte vor Christus*, in *Mysterium Salutis* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1967), 2:328.

7. Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2003), but also Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1983), 3:13; and John Zizioulas, "The Doctrine of the Trinity Today: Suggestions for an Ecumenical Study," in Alasdair Heron, ed., *The Forgotten Trinity* (London: British Council of Churches/CCBI, 1991), 3:23.

way of thinking about the immanent and the economic Trinity, operated with an axiom similar to Rahner's, as can be seen in his discussion of the question of the Spirit's procession from the Father *and* from the Son (the contentious doctrine of the *filioque*, which contributed to the schism in 1054, and which Barth endorses).⁸

More than two decades ago already, Catherine LaCugna argued that trinitarian doctrine should never have been severed from God's relation to us and therefore from human existence, from practical life. The separation of the *ad intra* (God's own life) from the *ad extra* (God's action toward the world) had been disastrous, rendering the Trinity vacuous, without existential import, when in fact the doctrine of the Trinity calls for a "form of life appropriate to God's economy."⁹ In part thanks to LaCugna, one notices a very important emphasis, in recent publications, on the relevance of the Trinity for the Christian and for human life, far from any theoretical speculation or abstraction about the idea of God or God "in Godself," independent of God's act toward creation. If one follows a decisive insight found in Reformation theology, this can still be a very fruitful orientation for today's constructive trinitarian reflection. Such reflection, as LaCugna and others have argued, is rooted in practice: baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; the Eucharist as a celebration of "the loving God who comes to us in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit"¹⁰; and liturgy. But it is also orientated toward practice (doxology, or praise of God), as it leads to a communal and individual commitment to the reality God creates and sustains out of love, namely all of creation, and particularly the least among us.¹¹ The emphasis of this practical dimension finds an echo in the present volume, especially in Karen

8. "... we have consistently followed the rule, which we regard as basic, that statements about the divine modes of being 'antecedently in themselves' cannot be different in content from those that are to be made about their reality in revelation." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 479; *Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1* (Zollikon: Verlag der evangelischen Buchhandlung, 1932), 503.

9. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 381. For a fairly recent appreciation of LaCugna's work, see Elizabeth T. Groppe, "Catherine Mowry LaCugna's Contribution to Trinitarian Theology," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 730–63. LaCugna's work has received critical acclaim for its breadth and vision, but it has been criticized for certain inaccuracies in the detail of her interpretation of several theologians (chs. 2–3 and 5–6 of her book tackle the Cappadocians, Augustine, Aquinas, and Gregory Palamas).

10. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 405.

11. The sixth part of Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), is notably devoted to "The Trinity and Christian Life" (455–543). It includes essays on the Trinity in liturgy and preaching, the Trinity and moral life, the

Kilby's essay, whose conclusion sketches the main lines of what could be called a "political trinitarian theology."

2. SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM

How should the relations within the Trinity be conceived, and what kind of inferences may one draw from these relations? Many questions need to be addressed here. Whereas the Greek Fathers strongly defended the "monarchy" of the Father, or the idea that the Father is the "sole cause" (*mia aitia*) of the begotten Son and the Spirit who proceeds from the Father, recent proposals, often with an eye toward human relations, have emphasized the "perichoretic" aspect, namely the "interpenetration" of the three divine persons or identities. "Social trinitarianism" is one of the major offshoots of the recent trinitarian renewal. This interpretation, which is often associated with differing proposals from Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, and others (such as Miroslav Volf, who wrote his dissertation under Moltmann's guidance), is not afraid of emphasizing the community of the three persons in their relation, and of using this as a model for social relations between human beings in the world. Egalitarian concerns are obvious here, and stand in opposition to hierarchical models that emphasize the obedience and subordination of the Son to the Father and thus the monarchy of the Father. Such a (more or less) direct application of trinitarian elements to the social field (from "social Trinity" to "social theory") has been criticized, especially for epistemological reasons, by Karen Kilby, as well as by others.¹²

3. PERSONS AND IDENTITY

What is the most adequate language for thinking about the three who comprise God's triune identity? One finds a striking agreement between Barth and Rahner on this specific question. Barth suggests the word *Seinsweisen*, or "modes of being," which should not be interpreted in any "modalist" sense, as if God were *in turn* Father, Son, and Spirit, or as if God merely *appears*—to human minds—as Father, Son, and Spirit (Barth's unfortunate way of speaking about a triple "repetition" in God led to further modalist misinterpretations).¹³ As

Trinity and politics. Sarah Coakley's *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) seems to be moving in similar directions.

12. See Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000): 432–45.

13. In a recently published handbook, Barth's position, as well as Rahner's, is still labeled "the neo-modal Trinity" model. See Richard J. Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson, and Matthew D. Lundberg, *An*

Augustine wrote, “What therefore remains, except that we confess that these terms sprang from the necessity of speaking, when copious reasoning was required against the devices or errors of the heretics?”¹⁴

Those who wish to maintain the relative adequacy of the word *person* are confronted by another difficulty: one sees fairly easily how the Father and his Son are “persons,” but the matter is quite different when one turns to the Holy Spirit. In the Augustinian–Latin tradition especially, the Spirit is often interpreted as the “bond of love” (*vinculum caritatis*) between the Father and the Son. As many have noted, the Spirit’s “personal” dimension seems to be very weak when compared with the two persons it brings into mutual relation. The reader will find echoes of this discussion in chapters 5 and 6, which are devoted to two advocates who plead the cause of the Holy Spirit’s “personality”: Robert W. Jenson, and one of his most brilliant doctoral students, Colin E. Gunton.

One of the questions the present volume seeks to address is whether the quality of the works produced in recent years on the Trinity is on a par with the quantity of studies. By what criteria may one reach the beginning of an answer to that question? If one wants to avoid rushing into effusive praise for this renewal and wishes to ask evaluative/qualitative questions beyond the simple acknowledgment of the quantity of books and articles, then one may want to reflect on the “measure” to be used when reflecting on the soundness of all these trinitarian proposals. Several contributions to the volume give an indirect answer to that question, sometimes in relation to a specific theological topic or school of thought. One essay, however, addresses the question directly and offers criteria for an evaluation of the contemporary contributions to trinitarian theology: the opening chapter by Christoph Schwöbel.

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Almost all of the essays collected in this volume were presented at a one-day conference that the editors organized at the University of Strasbourg, France, on February 5, 2013. The first aim of the conference was to introduce current anglophone trinitarian proposals to a francophone audience. The

Introduction to Christian Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 135–37. The Cappadocian Fathers themselves wrote of the divine persons’ “modes of being” (*tròpoi tès uparxèdōs*), obviously not in a modalist perspective, but in order to point out the irreducible distinctiveness of each person; cf. esp. Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto* 18,46 (152b), as well as *Homil.* 24,6 (PG 31,613a), and *Letter* 235,2, in *Saint Basile. Lettres*, ed. Yves Courtonne (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966), III:48,8. See already, but in a different (anthropological) sense, Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I,15 (548a).

14. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, VII,4,9; ed. Schaff, p. 110; see also V,9,10 and VII,6,11–12.

intention was to let some of the main Christian traditions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) come to expression and to show the variety of issues raised by trinitarian theology nowadays, not only in terms of topics (such as those listed above), but also in terms of currents (see Mathias Hassenfratz's contribution on process theology) and of disciplines (see Gavin D'Costa's paper on the relevance of the Trinity for the theology of religions). One of the topics that was not treated in Strasbourg, but which deserves attention, is the current feminist interpretation of trinitarian theology.¹⁵

There is something artificial in limiting the scope to the anglophone world. Clearly, these anglophone theologians are often well versed in (and influenced by) the major twentieth-century works first produced by German and German-speaking thinkers. In the case of Orthodox theology, as Aristotle Papanikolaou shows in his essay, one can only speak of an anglophone reception of Orthodox theologians who write in languages other than English. However, it seemed to the editors that it would be useful to offer something like a snapshot of some of the contemporary Anglo-Saxon contributions to the contemporary trinitarian debates and that such a picture, primarily intended for francophone readers, might also interest an anglophone readership.

15. For a recent contribution, see, e.g., Hannah Bacon, "Thinking the Trinity as Resource for Feminist Theology Today?," *Cross Currents* 62, no. 4 (2012): 442–64, as well as her monograph *What's Right with the Trinity? Conversations in Feminist Theology* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2009).