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THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

ESSAY

Question 1:

'We know God as three only as we meet God in Christ'.

What does this mean for the immanent Trinity?

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'We know God as three only as we meet God in Christ'. What does this mean for the immanent Trinity?

The New Testament bears witness to the life and work of Jesus Christ as having a triadic character. The doctrine of the Trinity is a theological consequence of this. Only as we meet God in Christ do we know the triune nature of God. In meeting God *ad extra*, we gain insight into God *ad intra*. The economic Trinity, as revealed through Christ, is simultaneously revelation of the immanent Trinity. Inferences from the latter contain potentialities on how to live in the light of who God is within himself.

Revelation and New Testament witness

God's self-revelation in Christ, as witnessed to in the New Testament, discloses a triadic character to Christ's salvific mission inextricably connecting Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The baptismal formula in the disciples' commission, Jesus' baptism, Jesus' exulting following the seventy-two returning, the promise of the Spirit, Stephen's martyrdom vision and Paul's Galatian gospel summary are examples of this triadic character.¹ We know God as three only as we meet God in Christ. Christ's humanity is the divine instrument for apprehending God's triadic redemptive activity towards humankind through the sending missions of the Son and Holy Spirit.² Father revealing Son, Son revealing Father and their revealing by the Spirit is evidenced by scripture.³ Scriptures, for Augustine, intimate 'a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality;...not three Gods, but one God'.⁴ Exegesis of, and theological reflection upon,

¹ Matt. 28:19; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 10:21; Jn. 14: 16-17, 26 & Acts. 1:4-8; Acts. 7:55-56; Gal. 4:4-6.

² e.g. Jn. 3:17; Jn. 14:26; Jn. 15:26; Jn. 16:7.

³ e.g. Matt.17:5; Jn. 14:6-11; Jn. 16:7-15.

⁴ Book 1:7 in Augustine., *On the Trinity*, Translated by Arthur West Haddan. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 3. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1301.htm>> [accessed 9/04/2021].

the New Testament witness to this triadic revelation engenders trinitarian doctrine: 'the Christian form of monotheism'.⁵ Barth stated '...we know God in Jesus Christ alone, and...in Jesus Christ we know the one God', it is 'exclusively in [Christ], that the abundance and plenitude of divine immanence is included and revealed.'⁶

Economic Trinity and economic implications for the immanent Trinity

God revealed *ad extra* as Trinity in the economy of salvation (*economic Trinity*) raises ontological questions. What insights does economic revelation disclose about God *ad intra*, who God is within himself (*immanent Trinity*)? Is there consonance between God as known to salvation history and God within his inner being?

Dogmatic and creedal confessions on the immanent Trinity, designating Father as begetter, Son as begotten and Spirit as proceeding, derive *inter alia* from economic mission scriptures such as Christ as *Logos* and only Son, the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Spirit being sent by the Son from the Father in Christ's name.⁷ Eternal generation and processions theologizing on such scriptures, stressing triunity against tritheism and endeavouring to obviate subordinationism and modalism, falls within the scope of reasonable insights from economic revelation.⁸ However, more generally, is revelation of the economic Trinity simultaneously revelation of the immanent Trinity? Modern theology largely answers this question in the affirmative, declaring the economic

⁵ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988), p.291.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol.II: 'The Doctrine of the Word of God', Part One*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), pp.318 & 320.

⁷ Jn. 1:1, 14; Jn. 3:16; Jn. 14:26; Jn. 15:26; Jn. 16:7.

⁸ For a helpful discussion on generation, birth and procession see Kasper, *Jesus Christ*, pp.277-280 and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp.162-170.

and immanent Trinity are not two trinities but one.⁹ Such declaration is partially a reaction to abstract trinitarian dogma becoming detached from Christian life and worship.¹⁰ Contributing to this are historical theological developments disconnecting the immanent from the economic Trinity. These include psychological and metaphysical speculative analogy,¹¹ the traditional concept *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* effectively obliterating intra-trinitarian distinctions in the economy so that, conceptual or verbal revelation excepted, human experience cannot infer the immanent Trinity's existence,¹² and creating 'the impression of God becoming a Trinity...with a view to his carrying out the economies of creation and redemption'.¹³ A key issue for contemporary trinitarian theology is addressing the historical dichotomy between immanent and economic Trinity by demonstrating how '...the eternal God can be related to human life and history and to the world.'¹⁴ Additionally, if the economic Trinity is simultaneously revelation of the immanent Trinity, a theological challenge is reconciling God's freedom not to be compelled to intervene in the world with the historicity of his having done so.¹⁵

⁹ Rahner's "The Trinity of the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity and vice versa", ...reflects a broad consensus among the theologians of the various churches.', Kasper, *Jesus Christ*, pp.273-274. See also Mann Park, *Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of the Trinity and its Significance for Contemporary Social Questions--A Dialogical Approach*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, 2000 (pdf) <<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10516/1/NQ54052.pdf>> [accessed 23/04/2021], p.96.

¹⁰ The doctrine of the Trinity '...has been treated apart from...incarnation, grace and creation...[and]...in isolation from concrete Christian life and piety.', *ibid.*, p.97.

¹¹ Peter C.Phan, 'Mystery of grace and salvation: Karl Rahner's theology of the Trinity', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. by Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.192-207 (p.201).

¹² See Dennis W. Jowers, *The Trinitarian axiom of Karl Rahner: The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), p.85 and David Coffey, 'Trinity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.98-111 (p.100).

¹³ Edmund Hill, 'St Augustine's *De Trinitate*: The doctrinal significance of its structure', *Revue d' Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 19.3-4 (1973), 277-286 (p.284). See also Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), pp.3-4 and Kasper, *Jesus Christ*, pp.261-263.

¹⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 'The trinitarian doctrines of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg in the context of contemporary discussion', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. by Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.223-242 (p.224).

¹⁵ '...the main issue of the economic-immanent Trinity is how to hold both God's sovereign freedom and historicity together in a logically viable way...', Park, *Jürgen Moltmann's Theology*, p.121.

In terms of economic implications for the immanent Trinity, if the economic and immanent Trinity are one, everything revealed about God's nature *ad extra*, through his temporal being in Christ, must substantially mirror God's nature in his eternal being. If not, then God as both subject and object of revelation is compromised, and the authenticity of what is disclosed is questionable. Theologizing on God *ad intra*, within a scope circumscribed by and reasonably deducible from economic revelation, should furnish deeper insights into God's intra-trinitarian Godself than are *prima facie* apparent from New Testament witness. A brief overview of salient points from three notable theologians, Barth, Rahner and Moltmann, who affirm inter-dependency of economic and immanent Trinity, will elucidate economic-immanent trinitarian theologizing.

Karl Barth

Revelation, God's self-unveiling in Christ, is the root of the Trinity.¹⁶ The reality of God encountered in revelation 'is His reality in all the depths of eternity'.¹⁷ The triune God revealed in one of his three modes of being is 'precisely the one He is in showing and giving Himself'.¹⁸ Jüngel interprets Barth as 'God's being *ad extra* corresponds to his being *ad intra*'.¹⁹ Revelation of the economic Trinity is therefore simultaneously revelation of the immanent Trinity, the latter being antecedent to and determinative of the former. Whilst God's work is his essence, each are distinct. God's work is consequential to grace. Revealed knowledge of God's being is limited to 'the extent

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol.I: 'The Doctrine of the Word of God', Part One*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), pp.309, 311 & 315.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.479.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.382.

¹⁹ Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth. A Paraphrase*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 2001), p.36.

that [God] gives himself to be known'.²⁰ God gives himself entirely but does not 'make Himself man's prisoner' thereby undermining divine freedom.²¹ On such freedom rests the 'incomprehensibility of God'.²² In reconciling divine freedom with salvation history, Barth emphasises God's sovereignty, precluding the immanent Trinity from being subsumed by the economic Trinity. Whilst economic revelation is the epistemic ground of the Trinity, it does not encompass God's transcendent immanence and solve the mystery of God.

Nonetheless, economic revelation enables, within the limitations of human comprehension, differentiation of the three modes of being of the one God.²³ These point to eternal distinctions within God from 'dissimilar relations of origin'.²⁴ As triunity implies both unity and difference in one essence, there is fellowship and 'complete participation of each mode of being in the other modes of being'.²⁵ Consequently, God's inner life is relational comprising 'a communion of love in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit subsist in their mutual indwelling relations'.²⁶ God's love revealed in Christ reflects 'the self-giving love of triune communion'.²⁷

²⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol.I, p.371.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*, p.372.

²⁴ *ibid.* Barth states 'He is God in His three modes of being as Father, Son and Spirit...[who]...have their basis and prototype in His own essence, in His own being as God'. *ibid.*, p.383.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.370.

²⁶ Peter Goodwin Heltzel and Christian T. Collins Winn, 'Karl Barth, reconciliation, and the Triune God', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. by Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) pp.173-191 (p.176). 'To fill out the contours of the immanent life of the triune God, Barth utilizes the patristic concepts of *homoousia* and *perichoresis*.' *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.178.

Barth has been criticised for 'under-determining the intra-trinitarian relations and assuming too much access to the internal being of God'.²⁸ Barth's economic-immanence theologizing has been viewed positively as not reducing God to how he appears in salvation history, and negatively as reducing the economic Trinity to repetition of the immanent Trinity, with the economy involving 'nothing new for God'.²⁹

Karl Rahner

The immanent Trinity is encountered in salvation history as 'the Father gives himself to us in absolute self-communication through the Son in the Holy Spirit'.³⁰ In salvific trinitarian experience, through incarnation and grace, we meet the 'very being of God as he is in himself' for 'God really gives himself and really appears as he is in himself'.³¹ For Rahner, God's self-communication and self-giving is of his ontological self, otherwise Christ and the Spirit cannot be experienced, grace is created grace, and revelation cannot disclose 'anything reliable about God'.³² By equating the economic to the immanent Trinity, Rahner signals 'no adequate distinction can be made between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the economy of salvation'.³³

In economic experience, God's three modes of presence are distinguishable for us, but belong to God 'in himself and for himself'.³⁴ The temporal missions of Son and Spirit reproduce their eternal processions within the immanent Trinity, and, because they

²⁸ Alan Torrance, 'The Trinity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. by John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.72-91 (p.83).

²⁹ Park, *Jürgen Moltmann's Theology*, p.105.

³⁰ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), p.137.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp.135-136.

³² Phan, 'Mystery of grace and salvation', p.198.

³³ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Herder and Herder, 1970), p.24.

³⁴ Rahner, *Foundations*, pp.136-137.

derive their being from the Father, represent modalities of the Father's self-communication.³⁵ God's oneness comprises 'communion or *perichoresis* among the three divine persons.'³⁶ In theologizing on God's inner life, Rahner has been charged with neglecting relationality within the Godhead, denying 'the possibility of mutual love in the Trinity...[and the]...Spirit as the mutual love of the Father and Son.'³⁷

Rahner's *Grundaxiom*³⁸ has been criticised for virtually identifying economic with immanent Trinity by over stressing salvation history to the detriment of God's 'ontological transcendence and freedom over creation'.³⁹ Critics assert, whilst the economic Trinity may equal the immanent Trinity its antithesis is not true. However, Rahner's *Grundaxiom* is not intended to signify mathematical equation or complete ontological identification. His theological intent is to rescue the immanent Trinity from its abstract independence from salvific life by locating the Trinity in soteriology, making it of primordial relevance to Christian experience and thereby 'restore the Trinity as a mystery of salvation'.⁴⁰ For Rahner 'the God of absolute distance...also wants to be the God of absolute closeness...in the spiritual depths of our existence.'⁴¹

³⁵ Coffey, 'Trinity', pp.99 & 105.

³⁶ Phan, 'Mystery of grace and salvation', p.196.

³⁷ Coffey, 'Trinity', pp.108-109.

³⁸ 'the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa', Jowers, *The Trinitarian axiom of Karl Rahner*, p.87.

³⁹ Park, *Jürgen Moltmann's Theology*, p.100.

⁴⁰ Phan, 'Mystery of grace and salvation', p.198.

⁴¹ Rahner, *Foundations*, p.137.

Jürgen Moltmann

The triune God appears in salvation history 'as he is in himself...and he is just what he is manifested as being.'⁴² Knowledge of God, through revelation of the economic Trinity, finds a response in the worshipping community of the church, the *Sitz im Leben* of the immanent Trinity.⁴³ In salvific experience the economic precedes the immanent Trinity, but 'in the order of being it succeeds it.'⁴⁴ It is in the doxological response to economic revelation there is distinction between immanent and economic Trinity.⁴⁵ In other words, God is worshipped for who he is in himself. Otherwise, both economic and immanent Trinity 'form a continuity and merge into one another.'⁴⁶ Doxological response anticipates the eschaton, so eschatologically the Trinity remains a mystery.⁴⁷

Moltmann theologizes a social doctrine of the Trinity. His starting point is the three divine persons working towards unity.⁴⁸ Trinitarian history is 'the eternal perichoresis of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in their dispensation of salvation'.⁴⁹ God's intra-trinitarian self is mutual indwelling of, and the relations between Father, Son and Spirit. It is God's love story 'whose very life is the eternal process of engendering, responding and blissful love.'⁵⁰ Salvation history is God incorporating humankind into 'his eternal triune life with

⁴² Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p.153.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.152.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p.153.

⁴⁵ 'The "economic Trinity" is the object of kerygmatic and practical theology; the "immanent Trinity" the content of doxological theology.' *ibid.*, p.152.

⁴⁶ *ibid.* Moltmann states 'the principle behind the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is: *Statements about the immanent Trinity must not contradict statements about the economic Trinity. Statements about the economic Trinity must correspond to doxological statements about the immanent Trinity.*' *ibid.*, p.154.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.161.

⁴⁸ Kärkkäinen, 'The trinitarian doctrines of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg', p.228.

⁴⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p.157.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

all the fulness of its relationships'.⁵¹ God's 'perichoretic at-oneness' finds its counterpart in the Christian community which the Spirit unifies in 'respect, affection and love'.⁵²

Sovereignty and the historicity of saving grace are reconciled in God being love. God's freedom cannot be expressed in not loving humankind, 'his love is his liberty and his liberty is his love'. God's love for the world is 'the very same love that he himself *is*.'⁵³ Iterations of Moltmann's trinitarianism have been criticised for reducing 'God's being into God's activity in history' thereby dissolving the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity.⁵⁴ Ultimate reconciliation of the distinction between economic and immanent Trinity has an eschatological resolution. At the eschaton, the economic Trinity will be completed, perfected, and transcended to the immanent Trinity.⁵⁵ Whether Moltmann's resolution succeeds in securing 'God's transcendent freedom and genuine historicity' has divided theological opinion.⁵⁶

Inferences from the immanent Trinity for the economy

Common to Barth, Rahner and Moltmann is their theologizing on the economic Trinity as God's revelation of himself as he is in himself. One objective of such theologizing is to connect the immanent Trinity to salvation history, Christian spirituality, and the world. Several contemporary theologians view inferences from theological insights into the inner life of God, such as the sociality of God, unity in difference and *perichoresis*, as

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*, pp.157-158.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.151.

⁵⁴ Park, *Jürgen Moltmann's Theology*, p.126.

⁵⁵ Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p.161. See also Kärkkäinen, 'The trinitarian doctrines of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg', p.228.

⁵⁶ Park, *Jürgen Moltmann's Theology*, pp.134-136.

giving rise to social potentialities.⁵⁷ Such inferences may be practically embodied in inter-human relationships so one may live in the light of who God is within himself. For social trinitarians 'God's life in community is the unique Christian identification of God'.⁵⁸ Conceiving God in perichoretic terms and analogically applying such conception may 'solve an immense spectrum of human and social problems.'⁵⁹ Social trinitarianism is arguably 'the achievement of the 20th-century Trinitarian Renaissance.'⁶⁰ Transposability of theological insights from the immanent Trinity back into the economy has potential to make trinitarian doctrine contemporarily relevant.

The immanent Trinity allows one to infer from God in Godself, divinity not solely bounded by economic patriarchal language and images. This opens possibilities to see in God qualities more typically assigned to femininity without undermining economic revelation. Moltmann views the inner life of the Trinity as having potential to overcome 'sexist language in the concept of God'.⁶¹ Eternal generation of the Son may be understood in terms of the 'the motherly Father' and 'the fatherly Mother'.⁶² However, feminist advocating for the substitution of feminine language for masculine designations has raised many theological objections, not least, disrupting the 'trinity in unity' thereby undermining centuries of careful and thoughtful trinitarian theologizing.⁶³ Nonetheless, feminist theology has been stated to be congruent with 'a theology of triune communion',

⁵⁷ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014) (ePub), p.113.

⁵⁸ Rian Venter, 'Reflections on Schleiermacher's God', *HTS Theological Studies*, 75.4 (2019), 1-6 (p.4)

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p.165.

⁶² *ibid.*, p.164.

⁶³ Roland M. Frye, 'Language for God and Feminist Language: Problems and Principles', in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. by Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1992), pp.17-43 (pp.22-26).

given the qualities embodied in 'the mystery of God as Trinity, as final and perfect sociality'.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Notwithstanding economic revelation, and theologizing on it, may illuminate the immanent Trinity, such illumination can only provide limited insight into the depths and magnitude of God's transcendent immanence. In its amplitude and majesty, the Trinity ultimately remains the mystery Christian theology acknowledges it to be but, in meeting Christ, is sufficiently known to be revered in Christian life and worship.

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⁶⁴ Migliore, *Faith*, p.114, quoting Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp.156-157.

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