



The Trinity in Recent Theological Literature

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The doctrine of the Trinity should be subtitled the guilt-producing doctrine. Most of us know that it should be more central in our theology than it is. We are haunted by the absoluteness of the Athanasian Creed on this subject: “Whoever wants to be saved should think thus about the Trinity.” Many of us also fear that faith in the triune God is slipping away, that it was once strong in the church but is so no longer. Johann Gerhard, writing in the early seventeenth century, speaks with a kind of confidence about this doctrine that we rarely find in ourselves:

For the catholic faith, necessary to all who are to be saved, not a confused and implied, but a distinct and explicit knowledge of the three persons of the Godhead is required.... Whoever is ignorant of the mystery of the Trinity does not acknowledge God as He has revealed Himself in His Word, and is ignorant of the definition of God given in the Scriptures. The mystery of the Trinity being ignored or denied, the entire economy of salvation is ignored or denied.¹

Modern theologians have often been willing to admit the neglect of the Trinity in the actual life of the church. Karl Rahner says that most Christians are “mere monotheists” and wonders whether anything else would change in the whole teaching of the church if the formal section on the Trinity suddenly dropped out of books of theology.

A number of the ablest modern theologians—Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and Jürgen Moltmann—have given major attention to making the Trinity more central and more vivid in the theology of the church. But before we consider them, we have to admit another difficulty. The terminology surrounding this doctrine is formidable indeed. Someone who goes back to the books will have to have considerable enthusiasm to be carried past the maze of technical terms and historical

¹Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, as cited in Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961) 209-10.

details which surround this doctrine. There are no good books to recommend on “The Trinity Made Simple.”²

Nevertheless, in the midst of the complex history and precise terminology, one can find exciting doctrines of God which would renew faith and preaching. This essay will attempt to ask about this central vision of God as triune in a number of recent theologians. My hope is that the central vision will be appealing enough to draw readers to the books themselves and to carry

them past a frustration that every reader (and writer) must feel in dealing with this doctrine.

I. THE BACKGROUND OF RECENT THEOLOGY

In terms of the Trinity, one might say that all theology since Augustine is “recent.” The theologians to be considered here will be three that have been writing on the Trinity in the last decade. Nevertheless, it is impossible to get to Hendrikus Berkhof, to Rahner, and to Moltmann without a quick look at the two major treatments of the Trinity which have so greatly influenced modern theology.

Friedrich Schleiermacher treated the Trinity in an appendix to his very influential *The Christian Faith* (1821-22). Schleiermacher admits that all that has been discussed in his Christology is the matter of which the doctrine of the Trinity is composed. Still he has a certain impatience with it, since it is not “an immediate utterance concerning the Christian self-consciousness, but only a combination of several such utterances.”³

But the real impact of Schleiermacher came not so much in his relegation of the doctrine to an appendix, nor in his noting, as others had, its relative abstractness in comparison to other items of faith. Schleiermacher commented that the doctrine had received no fresh interpretation at the time of the Reformation. He therefore proclaimed that at some future point “there must be still in store for it a transformation which will go back to its very beginnings.”⁴

All of this displays a certain impatience with the complex course of events by which the doctrine was formulated. Schleiermacher is not a hallower of tradition, but one who dares to be rather critical of the church in its doctrine-formulating age. He speaks of the ease, in those early centuries, with which “unconscious echos of what is pagan could find their way in” and boasts that the current time (the nineteenth century) is one “when no further admixture of heathenism was to be feared.”⁵

The other great modern treatment of the Trinity is found in Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, especially in Volume 1/1 (1932). Several contrasts with Schleiermacher are immediately apparent. Barth does not relegate the doctrine to an ap-

²A useful survey for getting started is Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., *What Are They Saying about the Trinity?* (New York: Paulist, 1979). The background to the current period is masterfully covered in Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1952). General surveys of the recent history of the doctrine can be found in the Berkhof, Rahner (*Encyclopedia*), and Moltmann (*Trinity and Kingdom*) titles listed in subsequent footnotes. A most important book which raises questions of great weight beyond the scope of this paper is Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York: Orbis, 1973).

³Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 2.738.

⁴Ibid., 2.747.

⁵Ibid.

pendix, but makes it the heart of his initial treatment of the Word of God. For Barth the Trinity is the hermeneutical principle for reading the term “God” in Scripture. Without this, everything about God is subject to misunderstanding.

Barth takes a more charitable view toward the traditional doctrine on the whole. He defends it against the charge that it is “unbiblical.” What it presents is not alien to the Bible, but “identical with the Biblical witness to revelation.”⁶ Nor does Barth have any patience with the

suggestion that the Reformers' endorsement of the doctrine was half-hearted.

Yet in his own way he knows that the doctrine is both the guardian of right faith and highly misleading. He is especially concerned that the term "person" has so changed in its secular conception through the centuries that almost anyone who today affirms the traditional three persons in one substance is in fact being led astray. Barth prefers to speak of three "modes of being" to guard against tritheism, which he sees as the greatest current danger for the faith.⁷

Schleiermacher's method makes him hesitant to speak about God; we are forced instead in theology to deal with our experience of God-consciousness. Barth's theology of revelation gives him the courage to speak directly of God, not only as manifest in Father, Son, and Spirit, but of God Himself. There is no other God than the one who reveals himself to humanity in Jesus Christ.⁸ Attempts to divide the economic trinity (God as revealed in salvation history) from the immanent trinity (God in himself) are useless attempts to protect the majesty of God. The shocking part of the Christian story is that God's self-manifestation or revelation is complete and adequate. This point is redeveloped and underscored in Barth's Christology as it appears in the later Volume 4/1.⁹

II. HENDRIKUS BERKHOF: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SCHLEIERMACHER?

One of the impressive works of theology to appear in this decade is *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, by Hendrikus Berkhof. Despite the modesty of this title, the work is a major theological statement (it appeared in Dutch in 1973). Berkhof is especially eager to recast the doctrine of God, to move away from the traditional and sterile attributes of God, and to speak on the basis of revelation of God as we truly encounter him in faith. He finds "holy love," "defenseless superior power," and "changeable faithfulness" much more adequate than the classic terms omnipresence, omniscience, simplicity, and eternity.

Berkhof does not treat the Trinity until he comes to the end of his section on Jesus Christ. There he admits that the initial discussion of God in no way implies "something like triuneness." The concept of God as creator and source of the world must deal with the richness of God; "but from this knowledge there is no way toward a doctrine of God as triune."¹⁰

To what, then, does the traditional doctrine of the Trinity refer? It is a description of "the structure of the covenant" rather than of the structure of "the

⁶Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936) 383.

⁷Ibid., 412.

⁸Ibid., 343.

⁹*Church Dogmatics* 4/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 193-96.

¹⁰Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 330.

one covenant partner, God." The trinity has an important place to play in theology if we see it as showing how "God, according to his eternal purpose, extends and carries on in time his own life so as to share it with man."¹¹

But does it tell us of God? No, says Berkhof, it speaks not of God-in-himself but rather of "the revealed God-with-us." For faith this is adequate, since revelation is of the essence of God, and in it we meet not "something of God, but God himself." Berkhof, unlike Barth and Rahner, wants to speak of a mystery of God beyond revelation; yet with them he wants to assert that what

one knows by revelation is reliable and salvific—of the essence of God.¹²

The Trinity is an event that is part of God. And yet, for Berkhof, the traditional trinitarian dogma is not especially helpful, and in some cases it is to be set aside. He is especially hostile to the Athanasian Creed (“a dry summary of trinitarian dogma, elevated to ecclesiastical confession”). In speaking of the essence of God and the relations among the persons, it loses its connections with the history of salvation and leads people to think of God in an Aristotelian way.¹³

If his doctrine of the Trinity reminds us more of Schleiermacher than of Barth, he has no taste to take up the invitation of Schleiermacher to reformulate the traditional doctrine. He sees Barth and others trying to rehabilitate it in ways that place “the process of humiliation and exaltation within God himself.” It is better for faith to speak of the triunity of God as an appendix to the treatment of Jesus Christ, but to stop trying to rehabilitate a full doctrine of the Trinity. “We may not let ourselves be held back...by a tradition, imposing though it may be, which is artificial and in its abstractness dangerous to the faith.”¹⁴

III. KARL RAHNER: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF BARTH?

In a variety of writings throughout the past fifteen years, Karl Rahner has been busy recasting the doctrine of the Trinity for modern Roman Catholic theology. It will not surprise readers of Rahner to know that he considers the doctrine of the trinity (a) important, (b) neglected, and (c) somewhat in need of reformulation. Yet what he has written on the subject is remarkably consistent throughout a major essay in his *Theological Investigations*, a book on the Trinity, and the relevant section of his recent major work, *Foundations of Christian Faith*.

The doctrine has been neglected and misunderstood, according to Rahner, because it has been too isolated from its natural starting point in the experience of salvation history. Roman Catholic theological treatises have tended to speak of God’s unity in such a way, and from such a philosophically isolated starting point, that when it came time next to speak of the Trinity, the transition seemed abrupt and there was little to say, other than repeating the historic formulae:

It looks as though everything important about God which touches ourselves had already been said in the treatise *De Deo Uno*....It would be more biblical

¹¹Ibid., 331-32.

¹²Ibid., 105-106.

¹³Ibid., 334.

¹⁴Ibid., 337.

and more Greek to start from the one absolutely unoriginated God, who is still the Father, even when it is not yet known that he is the Begetter and Spirator.¹⁵

The lack of something to say about the Trinity that would be meaningful for us is part of the Augustinian heritage—and an unhappy part. Augustine, wanting to preserve the mystery of God and the unity of God’s action toward the world, gave the famous rule: *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* (the external works of the Trinity are not divided). But rather than protecting the mystery and unity, says Rahner, this theological rule has killed interest in the Trinity or

limited what we can say to highly speculative notions about the *ad intra* life of God. A new approach is needed. Rahner has a proposal:

The methodological principle is the identity of the Trinity of the economy of salvation and the immanent Trinity....The gift which God imparts himself to the world is precisely God as the triune God, and not something produced by him through efficient causality, something that represents him.¹⁶

In one respect he is close to Berkhof here. He wants to affirm the reliability of revelation, of God's self-communication. But on the basis of that principle, one does not discard the immanent Trinity as irrelevant, but has new confidence to speak of God: "this very God himself and as himself in the strict sense."¹⁷ There is no mystery left over that makes trinitarian formulas inadequate or (with Schleiermacher) simply statements about our self-consciousness or experience of salvation.

How can one have the confidence to affirm that what we know of God *ad extra* is a revelation of God *ad intra*? For Rahner it is important to look at the language of salvation history very carefully. It is not enough, for example, to affirm that God has become human in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is not simply God in general, but the Son; the second Divine Person, the Logos of God in man, and he alone. So there is at least one 'sending', one presence in the world, one reality in the economy of salvation which is not merely appropriated to a certain divine person, but is proper to him.¹⁸

This is a technical point and yet, Rahner feels, one full of explosive power. The good news is that "each of the divine persons communicates himself as such to man, each in his own different and special way of personal being, in the free gift of grace."¹⁹ From this we must reconsider the whole way in which we have spoken both about God and about salvation and our relation to God in the various dogmas. It will no longer be the case that the Trinity will have no impact on the rest of theology.

The entire thrust of this theology of the Trinity seems very close to that taken by Karl Barth. The tradition is not to be scrapped, and yet at key points it must be criticized for being too careful, for abstracting away from the history of

¹⁵Karl Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise '*De Trinitate*,'" *Theological Investigations IV* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 84.

¹⁶Rahner, *Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 1758.

¹⁷Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 136.

¹⁸"Remarks," 87-88.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 95.

salvation in God's revelation. Rahner also seems close to Barth in his criticism of the term "person" in the traditional trinitarian formula. He is critical of Barth's suggestion of "mode-of-being" as a substitute, and yet engages in a very similar history of the changing concept of the

word person, and of the dangers of tritheism in the modern, casual use of “three persons.”²⁰

Rahner also is willing to speak of “a genuine secret pre-history of the relationship of the Trinity” in the Old Testament. He blames recent theologians for being too quick to dismiss the notion of the Trinity in the history of Israel’s knowledge of God.

The whole Old Testament is pervaded by the basic theme that God is the absolute mystery which no one can see without dying. Yet it is this very God himself who acts in history and converses with the Fathers....Where Word and Spirit do not exercise their sway, Yahweh has withdrawn from his people.²¹

Rahner knows well enough that no principle or revision can eliminate the mystery of the Trinity. Yet it is important to show that we can speak of God with confidence not only as “the God of infinite distance” but also as the one who wills to be “the God of absolute closeness in a true self-communication.” The doctrine of the Trinity guarantees the real presence of God in our personal and corporate lives.²²

IV. JÜRGEN MOLTMANN: BLAZING A NEW TRAIL?

In my view the most important book on the Trinity to appear in many years is Moltmann’s new *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (1981). In it Moltmann builds on the foundations of others (explicitly on Barth and Rahner), while at the same time sending the discussion of the doctrine in quite a new direction.

The continuities are substantial. Moltmann wants to root his doctrine of the Trinity in the concrete narrative relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit in the New Testament. The Trinity is not a problem imposed later, but something that is raised within Scripture itself. And Moltmann assumes, with Rahner, that it is wrong to follow Augustine and separate a notion of the relation among persons in the Godhead from the foundations of what we know about these relationships in the life and sufferings of the world.²³

Moltmann had begun to develop these ideas about the Trinity in his earlier work *The Crucified God* (German, 1972; English, 1974). There he had argued that the problem of the Trinity arises especially when one looks to the cross:

If the cross of Jesus is understood as a divine event, i.e., as an event between Jesus and his God and Father, it is necessary to speak in trinitarian terms of the Son and the Father and the Spirit. In that case the doctrine of the Trinity is no longer an exorbitant and impractical speculation about God, but is nothing other than a shorter version of the passion narrative of Christ.²⁴

²⁰*Foundations*, 134-35; *Encyclopedia*, 1769.

²¹“Remarks,” 99-100.

²²*Encyclopedia*, 1760; *Foundations*, 137.

²³Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 64, 95, 190.

²⁴Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 246.

This means that the Trinity is “no self-contained group in heaven, but an eschatological

process open for men on earth.”²⁵

So far this seems highly continuous with the trinitarian theologies of Barth and of Rahner. But the careful reader will have noted the word “group” in the last quotation. Moltmann may not want to think of God as a self-contained group, but group is better than unity, for the great danger in trinitarian theology is monotheism, an abstract monotheism which pushes out or minimizes the living and dynamic relations among the persons of the Trinity.

Moltmann will be much more willing than Rahner and Barth to speak of persons, because he does not see tri-theism as the great danger for the modern age. Working from an abstract concept of God, the modern person decides for or against the existence of God rather than attending to the remarkable and unexpected story of the going forth of Father, Son, and Spirit.²⁶

He argues that both Rahner and Barth have failed to provide an adequate basis for revelation and self-communication of God in their theology, for in the end both of them are modalists whose God is solitary and distant from the suffering of this world.²⁷ And Moltmann fears that strict monotheism will finally make Christology impossible, driving Christ into being one of the prophets or a mere manifestation of God. Monotheism cannot in the end be reconciled with the shocking story of the crucified God.²⁸

Therefore Moltmann proposes to follow the lead of Eastern Christianity by starting with the threeness of God and making the unity the problem. This is less likely to kill the story, to squeeze out the dynamic encounter of God with the world. But how is the unity of God to be understood? Readers of *The Trinity and the Kingdom* will have to judge whether Moltmann answers this successfully. But it will not surprise those who remember him as the theologian of hope to know that this unity is an “eschatological question about the consummation of the trinitarian history of God.”²⁹

And it is the God who has a history that Moltmann is most eager to present as the God known through the biblical message. Only such a God is capable of suffering, and only a suffering God is worthy of being worshipped and followed in a world like this one:

The suffering of a single innocent child is an irrefutable rebuttal of the notion of the almighty and kindly God in heaven. For a God who lets the innocent suffer and who permits senseless death is not worthy to be called a God at all. Wherever the suffering of the living in all its manifold forms pierces our consciousness with pain, we lose our childish primal confidence and our trust in God.³⁰

If this begins to sound like the Moltmann of old, readers will not be surprised to know that there is a political agenda in this book. One might ask, “Why is Moltmann with his concerns messing around with the Trinity?” His answer

²⁵Ibid., 249.

²⁶*Trinity and the Kingdom*, 17.

²⁷Ibid., 144-48.

²⁸Ibid., 131.

²⁹Ibid., 149.

³⁰*Trinity and Kingdom*, 47.

would be that the abstract monotheism which he opposes, and which he finds so prevalent even in earnest trinitarian theology, has serious and unhappy political implications. “Monotheism was and is the religion of patriarchy, just as pantheism is probably the religion of earlier matriarchy. It is only the doctrine of the Trinity” which overcomes domination—political, sexual, and ecclesiastical.³¹

I think readers will find this final section of the book exciting, and perhaps even convincing. His task is a difficult one: to convince us that our conceptions of God have serious practical and even political implications. Some readers will do well to read the last chapter first, and from that have perhaps the energy to tackle the more formidable but very engaging earlier chapters.

A brief review cannot do justice to Moltmann’s achievement in this book and to his daring change of direction of trinitarian thinking. We have noted that he finds himself more in sympathy with the ways the Eastern Church has tended to think of the Trinity. Readers will want also to ponder his complex discussion of the *filioque* debate and his suggestions for how it should be resolved. (A hint: the Spirit proceeds from the Father of the Son.³²)

But I want to come back to the question of his relation to Barth and to Rahner. He has clearly declared his independence in this book, and on the crucial issue of his critique of monotheism he is surely correct. Yet I find more continuity than he admits, especially with Barth. At key points in his fleshing out of trinitarian understanding he uses images that are very much taken from Barth. Two examples: that God is not Father in a patriarchal sense, but chiefly the Father of Jesus Christ, and that God is certainly not to be considered Almighty in a sense that is analogous to might and power in this world.³³

But the true continuity comes, I think, in this willingness to take the Trinity seriously, starting from the story of Jesus Christ rather than from some philosophical or natural notions of God. It is this engagement with the Crucified God which gives power to the book and which propels the reader along, even in moments of disagreement. Moltmann knows, as Barth did and as Rahner does, that God is a mystery. And yet this mysterious triune God in all their theologies is not one so distant from us that words fail us to speak of God at all; the Trinity we pray to and sing about is a “strong name,”³⁴ and the mystery is that, while we can never exhaust speaking of that God, we have much that is rich and deep to say.

³¹Ibid., 165.

³²Ibid., 187.

³³Ibid., 163, 197.

³⁴See *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), hymn number 188, ascribed to St. Patrick.