KARL RAHNER'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY:

IS IT MODALIST?

by

Seán Andrew Stokes

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Sean Stokes
Karl Rahner's Trinitarian Theology: Is it Modalist?

Part One attempts to identify and evaluate the major features of
Rahner's trinitarian theology. Part Two considers and rejects
Moltmann's charge that Rahner's position is modalist and
concludes that certain aspects of Rahner's theology - especially
the place of God the Father's *monarchia* - help us to understand
the unity of the Godhead.

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Karl Rahner's Trinitarian Theology: Is it Modalist?

This thesis seeks to defend Karl Rahner's trinitarian theology
from Jürgen Moltmann's charge that it is modalist.   A
prolegomenon identifies some of the more recent concerns of
trinitarian theology which, while not explicit in Rahner's work,
are clear in Moltmann's.   Part One attempts to identify the major
features of Rahner's trinitarian theology - how it is developed
in light of his theology of grace, his aim at recapturing the
focus of the Greek Fathers.   A general evaluation of Rahner's
trinitarian theology is included.   Part Two examines the
substance of Moltmann's charge, situating it within the fuller
context of his doctrine of God.   The thesis concludes that
Moltmann's charge is overstated and that certain aspects of
Rahner's theology - especially the place of God the Father's
monarchia - indeed have a place in trinitarian discourse today.

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Prolegomenon: Trinitarian Faith and Its Contemporary Context

Though the cultural influence of Christian churches has declined in societies where previously they had been central players, the demands of their evangelical mission have not. Every generation of Christians is called to "make disciples of all nations", accounting for the hope that is in us through the proclamation of "God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"[1]. This is the unchanging goal of both evangelization and catechesis. The manner in which each generation works to attain this goal, however, does change. Also changing is the manner in which each generation seeks to articulate anew that knowledge of the truth made possible by grace. However changeable their expression, the mission of the Church and the truth she proclaims share an essential unity. What she teaches the world about God is not some sort of rarefied gnosis or secret code. It is not a kind of 'inside information' which only a select few might acquire. Rather, "the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that He might forever sanctify the Church, and thus all believers would have access to the Father through Christ in the one Spirit"[2]. Christian faith and life is faith and life in the Trinity. The salvation we receive is salvation by the triune God. To die with Christ and receive a share in his being raised up by the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit is to be baptized in the name of the triune God. Indeed, "the

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[1] 1 Tim. 2:4.

[2] Lumen Gentium 4.

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Trinity is a mystery of *salvation*, otherwise it would never have been revealed."[3]

How surprising to admit, then, the correctness of Karl Rahner's contention that

"the treatise on the Trinity occupies a rather isolated position in the total dogmatic

system"[4]. While Rahner explains how this unfortunate development has come about, the

real and pastoral concern of his trinitarian theology is the effect this 'isolated position'

has had on the life and faith of believers:

> Someone might reply that our future happiness will consist precisely in face-to-face vision of this triune God, a vision which "introduces" us into the inner life of the divinity and constitutes our most authentic perfection, and that this is the reason why we are already told about this mystery during this life. But then we must inquire how this could be true, if between man and each one of the three divine persons there is no real ontological relation, something more than mere appropriation. How can the contemplation of any reality, even of the loftiest reality, beatify us if intrinsically it is absolutely *unrelated* to us in any way?... is our awareness of this mystery merely the knowledge of something purely extrinsic, which, as such, remains as isolated from all existential knowledge about ourselves as in our present theology the treatise on the Trinity is isolated from other dogmatic treatises telling us something about ourselves conducive to our real salvation?[5]

For Rahner, this perceived unrelatedness of the Trinity to our human situation is a cause for

great concern. In the mid-sixties, when Rahner's major work on the Trinity was written, this

unrelatedness was evidenced not only by the isolation of trinitarian theology in dogmatics,

but also by a lack of interest in trinitarian theology generally.

Our situation today has changed somewhat. Trinitarian theology, though still

suffering from the legacy of its isolated position, has been the focus of renewed theological

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[3]Karl Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> (London: Burns and Oates, 1970)
p. 21.

[4]Rahner, p. 14.

[5]Rahner, p. 15.

activity. There are several reasons for this, not the least of which is the contribution made to trinitarian thought by Karl Rahner. Rahner's trinitarian theology may not be the most salient or noteworthy achievement of his life's work, but the importance of Rahner to theology - and especially to Catholic theology - has made him a posthumous 'dialogue-partner' in the work of many contemporary theologians. Other theologians have used his insights as either a basis or a point of departure for their own participation in trinitarian discourse. Today, most theologians writing on the Trinity take seriously the need to demonstrate the 'real ontological relation' between human beings and the triune God. Rahner's hermeneutical concerns are still valid for trinitarian theology today.

It is only natural, however, that these concerns have taken on a somewhat different character. Rahner traces the apparent isolation of the treatise on the Trinity to the separation, in Aquinas, between the treatises *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino*. For Rahner, as we shall see later, a way to overcome this disjunction is to recover the significance of our pre-Augustinian trinitarian inheritance. Today, however, there are new concerns about the Trinity which Rahner never encountered. There are three important areas where new questions are being raised: (1) the tension between the biblical terms 'Father' and 'Son' and the desire of many in the Church for a more 'inclusive' language; (2) the attempt to overcome certain misappropriations of satisfaction theory with a new trinitarian theology of the cross; (3) the desire for a 'social' doctrine of God to reflect the concerns of various theologies of liberation. In each of these areas, there are a number of theologians who have made a particular set of concerns their own. There are legitimate concerns in each of these areas, but each also bears certain pitfalls for the doctrine of God. One theologian whose

work represents an effort to integrate the concerns of each of these areas is Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann has been one of the most vociferous critics of Rahner's trinitarian theology and it is from the vantage point of these more contemporary concerns that he radically differentiates his own position from Rahner's. Since this essay is about Rahner's trinitarian theology and Moltmann's accusation that is modalistic, we might outline each of these areas of concern in order to better understand the context of Moltmann's critique.

Concern for Inclusive Language

Language has always been a central area of difficulty in the tradition of the Church's trinitarian thought. This was apparent in the differentiation of *homoousios* and *homoiousios* in the fourth century. It is clear in Rahner's own efforts to clarify the meaning of the term 'person' through the use of an explanatory concept. A generation ago, feminist linguists began to argue that masculine personal pronouns are not inclusive of females and that the custom employing them as such is symptomatic of sexism. Christian churches have encountered this question as well and have attempted, to varying degrees, to redress it. For example, the NRSV translation of Ps. 146:5 begins "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob" instead of the RSV "Happy is he...". Where previous grammar in English opted for the accuracy of a pronoun's number over any inaccuracies in gender (since there are not any third person singular pronouns which refer to both sexes), the custom today is increasingly to choose 'inclusivity' (which can only be found in third person plural pronouns) over accuracy in number. The achievement of a more inclusive language, sensitive to the concerns of feminism, is possible in virtually every discipline and aspect of social life.

Christian theology, however, encounters a special problem in the desire for inclusive language. Churches not only speak of human beings, but of God. Plural pronouns are not possible. Here the NRSV retains the masculine singular ("O give thanks to the Lord for he is good...", Ps. 136:1) though other translations will use alternatives, especially by replacing any pronouns for God with the consistent use of the proper noun[6]. For some, however, the sinister nature of masculine language is not so readily rectified and "the predominantly male images and roles of God make Yahwism an agent in the sacralization of patriarchy"[7]. This is especially problematic when one considers the names 'Father' and 'Son' in the trinitarian expression of the Church's faith:

> The metaphors of "Father" and "Son" trouble many feminist theologians. For some, trinitarian language promotes a social world based on hierarchy and inequality between men and women. Mary Daly, for example, regards the personification of God as Father as the foremost symbol of patriarchy.[8]

One might question some of the presuppositions of such a concern. Can the ecclesiology articulated and practised by the Church's magisterium be described as 'patriarchy' when certainly the Roman Church has known few actual fathers in positions of authority? Is 'patriarchy' then meant metaphorically since actual human fathers also find themselves 'alienated' from office in the Church? Is another term more suitable? Even if one grants that the Christian tradition is patriarchal, is there a definite link between the terms

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[6]cf. The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version. (Oxford, 1995)

[7]Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) p. 61.

[8]Catherine M. LaCugna, "The Trinitarian Mystery of God" in J. Galvin et. al. Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives, Vol. I. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) p. 180.

Father/Son and that patriarchy? While these may be legitimate questions of some of the

historiographical presuppositions of the feminist critique of the terms 'Father' and 'Son',

there is still the ecclesiological fact that some Christians find this language alienating. No

Christian can afford to ignore brother and sister Christians when they articulate a sense of

disappointment and alienation. Whether all attempts to overcome this alienation are

theologically legitimate, however, remains to be seen:

> Some feminist scholars regard unitarianism as the only viable alternative to
> traditional trinitarian doctrine... Recently some [other] writers have stressed
> the "feminine" characteristics of the Holy Spirit as a way to counterbalance
> masculine pronouns for Father and Son.[9]

Another attempt to solve this problem involves the use of alternative doxological

formulae for the Trinity. Instead of praying in the name of the Father and of the Son and

of the Holy Spirit, some worship services refer to the "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" or

"Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier". While most Christians readily recognize the

incommensurability of unitarianism with their faith, this alternative formula is more difficult

to evaluate. It abandons the personal language in the traditional formula and identifies each

member of the Trinity with a particular function. While it is true that the Father is Creator,

it is also true that all things were made through the Son. While the Son is our Saviour, God

is our Saviour too. We may say the Spirit sustains us, but we may also say the Father

sustains us in the Spirit. This formula obscures the distinction between the persons of the

Trinity and points to one God who does different things for us. This is dangerously close to

Sabellius, "confusing the Father with the Word and so maintaining that Father and Son are

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[9]LaCugna, pp. 182-183.

one and the same Person"[10]. In Canada's second largest Christian church, this is even an optional baptismal formula.[11] In such a case, however, there is no intention to reinvent a third century heresy, but to deal with a twentieth century concern. That such language is commensurate with modalism, however, is a further concern. Whatever the need to use inclusive language in the churches, one thing is certain: all attempts to 'resymbolize' the doctrine of God must be accountable to the Scriptures and the Church's tradition. If it is possible to reject a baptismal formula because its language is politically unacceptable, then certainly the basic criterion of a new formula should be theological acceptability. One might go so far as to venture - without in any way meaning to diminish the experience of those who find the words 'Father' and 'Son' alienating - that theological acceptability and liturgical acceptability may even be more important than the political acceptability of a given formula. It is also not impossible that rather than merely 'fixing' a formula to correct an experience of alienation, a more fulsome ecclesiological renewal may be required.

The problem of Christ's Satisfaction and the Fatherhood of God

We have been fortunate in our own time to see a renewal in soteriology and much of contemporary trinitarian theology represents an attempt to explain the soteriological nature of this doctrine. Of key concern here is the relation of God the Father to the suffering and death of his Son. Most Western churches have inherited a soteriological tradition which might be identified as 'satisfaction theory'. In its more classical formulations, as in SS.

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[10]St. Ambrose, De Fide. I,vi.

[11]cf. Your Child's Baptism. (The United Church of Canada, 1995)

Anselm and Thomas, satisfaction theory is able to show the trinitarian nature of the economy of salvation; in other forms, however, the implications of satisfaction theory for the doctrine of God constitute a serious difficulty. These other forms of satisfaction theory, in their attempt to delineate God's right to retributive justice over sinners, turn Christ's sacrifice into a 'substitution' and speak of the 'imputation' of sins to Christ. This results in retributive justice over Christ which allows, in turn, Christ's justice to be imputed to the sinner who believes in Christ. "If he be innocent and bears not our sins, then do we bear them and in them we shall die and be damned"[12]. The piety which is engendered by such versions of 'substitution theory' can easily collapse into a doctrine of God where the Father becomes a kind of sadist, exacting sufficient pain and torture from the Son so that Christ might settle humanity's accounts. In the attempt to preserve the justice of God, satisfaction theory - in its worst forms - shows us an unjust God who punishes offenses without regard to the guilt of the one being punished. This understanding of the redemption would have the Trinity take on a kind of dysfunctionality for the salvation of sinners.

While ideas of 'substitution' or 'satispassion' (i.e. "suffering enough" as opposed to Anselm's "doing enough") are misappropriations of satisfaction theory, they do have a kind of currency in the experience of many Christian believers. The difficulty of this problem is accentuated by what psychological literature has sought to teach us about familial dysfunctionality and particularly about child abuse. Where the statement in Peter's sermon,

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[12]Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. in J. Dillenberger, Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings. (New York: Doubleday, 1961) p. 138.

Acts 2:23[13], is misconstrued the difficulty is obvious and the sufferings of Christ are readily apparent as a 'punishment' from some kind of 'child-abuser in the sky'. Though such an understanding is certainly heretical to Christianity, even orthodoxy has its difficulties: "God therefore neither wills evil to be done, nor wills it not to be done, but wills to permit evil to be done; and this is a good"[14]. Incorrectly understood and extending the metaphor of familial dysfunctionality, such 'permission' on the part of the Father seems like a kind of complicity with Christ's abusers. When a new awareness of the problem of familial dysfunctionality (which might be gained from therapy or therapeutic literature) attempts to coexist with a heretical or wrongheaded understanding of the relation between the Father and the Son on Good Friday, trinitarian and Christian faith seems impossible.

There are several ways out of this dilemma. Certainly the most necessary is a correction - not only theologically, but pastorally - of incorrect appropriations of satisfaction theory. No church can afford a heresy where the Father inflicts retributive justice on the Son, no matter how strongly it articulates the freedom of Christ. Where such a correction has been achieved and an apparent 'apathy' in God the Father remains, the more fulsome development of soteriology beyond the limits of satisfaction theory is necessary. For some, there is a 'short-cut' around this difficulty and that is to challenge the traditional axiom of God's impassibility[15]:

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[13]"this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law." (NRSV)

[14]Summa Theologica, I, q. 19, a. 9.

[15]cf. J. Moltmann, "The Motherly Father. Is Trinitarian Patripassianism Replacing Theological Patriarchalism?" in Metz, Schillebeeckx, Concilium, Vol. 143: God as Father? (New York:

> The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son. Unless this were so, the doctrine of the Trinity would still have a monotheistic background.[16]

This "trinitarian patripassianism", to use Moltmann's own term, maintains the distinction between persons almost to the point where God the Father becomes an active player - or pathetically inactive, rather - in the drama of Good Friday. The distinction between Father and Son is, in the crucial moment, more accentuated. For Jüngel, however, this distinction is the basis of an identification for "only the God who is identical with the Crucified One makes us certain of his love and thus of himself"[17].

In light of the profound contemplation of the Cross afforded us by theologians as distinguished as Moltmann and Jüngel, one almost forgets what was the original basis for the patristic objection to the idea of a 'passible' God:

> The fathers were compelled to differentiate this God of history as understood in the Bible from mythological conceptions of gods who undergo becoming and who suffer and change, and of their mythologically interpreted incarnations.[18]

If we are to say, then, that the Father 'suffers', we must be extremely careful to avoid any mythopoeic account of Good Friday. If the kenotic direction of the Incarnation finds its fulfillment in the Cross and is the condition for the possibility of a divine person 'feeling

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Seabury, 1981) pp. 51-56. also E. Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983)

[16]Jürgen Moltmann, The Crucified God. (London: SCM, 1974) p. 243.

[17]ibid.

[18]Walter Kasper, The God of Jesus Christ. (New York: Crossroad, 1984) p. 190

forsaken', then how are we to say with Moltmann that the unincarnate Father is 'forsaken',

that he 'suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of his Son'? Does he only 'get it

back', then, on Easter Sunday like some hero in the last act of a drama?

Like the desire for inclusive language, the desire to understand the fatherhood of God

in light of what we are increasingly coming to believe about fatherly justice is an important

concern in trinitarian theology today. However, this desire is not without certain pitfalls for

the doctrine of God.

'Social' Doctrines of the Trinity

A third question in contemporary trinitarian discourse concerns the relation of the

doctrine of God to politics. As the "fatherhood" of God for feminist scholars and the

"impassibility" of the father for soteriology, the "monarchy" of God constitutes a theological

problem in various political and liberation theologies. The historiographical presupposition

is that the perpetuation of certain theological ideas and images - a God who is omnipotent

pantokrator, for example - has led to the perpetuation of certain forms of social injustice.

What the Church says of the monarchy of God is historically objectified in its hierarchical

structure and in the politics of those societies which it influences:

> The monarchical structure of the institutional church is similarly based on this:
> a single church body, a single head (the pope), a single Christ, a single God.
> The roots of this understanding go back to St. Ignatius of Antioch at the
> beginning of the second century: the celestial monarchy is the foundation for
> earthly monarchy - the concentration of all power in one person, sole
> representative of the sole God. This sacred power then comes down through
> descending orders of hierarchy, allowing inequality within the community to

appear. In this pre-trinitarian vision, authority adopts a paternalistic attitude...[19]

The theologian who accepts these historiographical presuppositions will attempt to develop a doctrine of God which will correct or eliminate traditional ideas of the monarchy. A new emphasis on the differentiation between the persons of the Godhead and their equality with one another becomes the source of a new 'social' doctrine of God:

> If oppressed believers come to appreciate the fact that their struggles for life and liberty are also those of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, working for the Kingdom of glory and eternal life, then they will have further motives for struggling and resisting; the meaning of their efforts will break out of the restricting framework of history and be inscribed in eternity, in the heart of the absolute Mystery itself. We are not condemned to live alone, cut off from one another; we are called to live together and to enter into the communion of the Trinity. Society is not ultimately set in its unjust and unequal relationships, but summoned to transform itself in the light of the open and egalitarian relationships that obtain in the communion of the Trinity, the goal of social and historical progress.[20]

Unlike Rahner who feared a misunderstanding of the term 'person' in trinitarian discourse, a social doctrine of the Trinity seeks to accentuate its modern connotations. The result is a God who is dynamically *in relation*, who is an intersubjectivity. Where Rahner had developed an 'explanatory concept' to retrieve the patristic meaning of the term 'person', a social doctrine of the Trinity seeks to update 'substance' or *ousia* to correspond to a contemporary understanding of person. Recovering the theology of Richard of St. Victor, the principle of God's unity is love. God is a community of divine persons:

> Yet, if this communitarian hypothesis for the Trinity be acceptable, then each

[19]Leonardo Boff, Trinity and Society. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) p. 153.

[20]Boff, pp. 157-158.

of the three divine persons would possess his own consciousness, hence have a mind and will proper to himself. The three divine persons would, however, think the same and will the same in all things, since their perfect self-knowledge and self-donation to one another would eliminate any reason for discord or dissension among themselves and thus guarantee perfect unanimity with one another. Admittedly, within our human communities such a high degree of mutual agreement would be impossible, but perhaps this is due to our finitude rather than to the nature of community as such.[21]

The consequences of such an approach are far-reaching. Politically, a social Trinity is a God of social democracy, a God of interdependence who challenges the ethical wilderness of the marketplace and the authoritarianism of police states. Ecclesiologically, "the hierarchy which preserves and enforces unity is replaced by the brotherhood and sisterhood of the community of Christ"[22]. Theologically, however, its real strengths are tempered by the way in which this approach appears to confirm Rahner's fear that the danger of tritheism "looms much larger than that of Sabellian modalism"[23]. The social doctrine of the Trinity not only explains the correlation between the doctrine of God and the history of injustice, but seeks to project an idea of social justice onto God. This represents an important opportunity for Christians to discover "a real ontological relation" to the Trinity, but there are temptations here as well. At its worst, this approach may lose the distinction between God and the world and turn God into a mere model for our own social aspirations. The apparent 'threat' of God almighty may be replaced by envisioning God as a kind of utopia, a cosmic base-community. If our idea of what history should be is so certain that we also

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[21]Joseph Bracken, "The Holy Trinity as a Community of Divine Persons, I" in Heythrop Journal, 15, (1974) p. 181.

[22]Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) p. 202.

[23]Rahner, p. 43.

know what God should be, history loses its open-endedness. Theology accepts the verdict of

a Feuerbach[24] and the Church loses its eschatological purpose. A church with an

exclusively 'social' doctrine of God might also risk losing the membership of Christians who

stubbornly "maintain the monarchy"[25] or refuse to vote social democrat.

A period of creative development in the Church's tradition is always marked by an

imaginative boldness and a certain degree of contention. This was true in the patristic era

and it is true today in the new interest and activity which marks contemporary trinitarian

discourse. Rahner's concern that the Christian doctrine of the triune God have a 'real

ontological relation' to the life and faith of believers has taken on a greater specificity in our

own time. While it is encouraging to find ourselves in such a period, it is also necessary that

imaginative boldness be *in communion with* the trinitarian faith of the past. The correlation

of the doctrine of the Trinity to the faith experience of believers not only involves an

obligation to those believers, but to the doctrine of the Trinity as well. In turn, fidelity to

the *doctrine* of the Trinity is not only fidelity to God, but to those who have believed before

us.

The three areas of concern, outlined above, form a special background to this essay.

They were not explicit concerns of Rahner's trinitarian theology, but they do constitute some

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[24]cf. Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity. (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) p. 73: "God springs out of the feeling of a want; what man is in need of, whether this be a definite and therefore conscious, or an unconscious need, - that is God. Thus the disconsolate feeling of a void, of loneliness, needed a God in whom there is society, a union of beings fervently loving each other."

[25]Tertullian, Against Praxeas. iii.

of the hermeneutical concerns of his critics, especially Moltmann. His critics - and thus the contribution of his trinitarian theology to our own time - can only be understood in light of those concerns and presuppositions which form the basis of their objections to his trinitarian theology.

When we consider the use of trinitarian doxologies which sound modalistic or the attempt to develop a 'trinitarian patripassianism', one realizes that the 'temptation' to modalism is not altogether a thing of the past. In this context, we encounter the accusation of some of Rahner's critics (notably, Jürgen Moltmann) that his trinitarian theology is modalistic. Given Rahner's important place in Catholic theology and given, too, that modalism is a misappropriation of trinitarian orthodoxy, such an accusation is a serious matter. In an age when our ecumenical hopes are usually turned toward more peripheral issues, it is remarkable to find one important theologian invoking the spectre of a third century heresy against the trinitarianism of another. In such a circumstance, students may not simply rely on which theologian is 'more expert' or 'more famous', but must themselves determine the more legitimate of alternative positions.

Just as the allegation that Rahner's theology is modalist needs to be understood in our contemporary context, his trinitarian theology must be read in light of his own particular hermeneutical concerns. Chapter One of this essay will seek to articulate those concerns and Chapter Two will proceed to a general explication of Rahner's trinitarian theology. Rahner's trinitarian theology emphasizes the importance of the Greek tradition and presents the doctrine in the light of his own theology of grace. Chapter Three will examine Rahner's evaluation of the Latin trinitarian tradition. Chapter Four will consider the substance of

Moltmann's accusation that Rahner's trinitarian theology is modalistic and seek to evaluate the legitimacy of Moltmann's critique. Moltmann's trinitarian theology represents an attempt to reconcile each of the three peculiarly contemporary concerns outlined above. A fifth chapter will argue that Rahner's trinitarian theology is not modalistic though it does have a 'proximity' to modalism. This 'proximity' to modalism, however, is no more problematic than the proximity of a social doctrine of the Trinity (like Moltmann's) to tritheism. Moreover, Rahner's fidelity to the 'monarchia' of the Father constitutes a safeguard against tritheism and patripassianism. His 'proximity' to modalism is legitimate because his hermeneutical suspicion concerning the threat of tritheism is legitimate.

Chapter One: The Hermeneutical Context of Karl Rahner's Trinitarian Theology

Though we will eventually proceed to the concerns raised by Moltmann, we must first

consider Rahner's concerns for trinitarian theology. While the density of his thought may

not always readily suggest it, Rahner's theology is considerably pastoral. His presentation of

the doctrine of the triune God is not meant to be another entry in a theological system, but

a demonstration of how the God of our salvation is revealed to us as the Trinity and how, in

turn, the Trinity is the God of grace. For Rahner, anthropology is a starting point for

theology - not a collapse of theology into anthropology, but a presupposition of the Christian

message. A human being "is the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-

communication of God"[26]

It is precisely because God's grace is a *self*-communication that the identity of God as

the triune God of revelation is so important. Herein lies Rahner's fundamental purpose: to

show the Trinity's 'real ontological relation' to human beings.

Rahner's fear is that many Christians do not perceive this 'real ontological relation':

> Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists'. We must
> admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the
> major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.[27]

Here Rahner distinguishes a 'mere monotheism' from a Christian and trinitarian

monotheism. Though the problem exists in the religious consciousness of believers, it is not

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[26]Rahner, <u>Foundations of Christian Faith.</u> (New York: Crossroad, 1978) p. 116.

[27]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> pp. 10-11.

easily solved on that level. Too often there is the temptation to treat monotheism and

trinitarianism as mutually exclusive options from which the believer must choose:

> We must continually avoid the following dilemma: either we find in religious consciousness, as mentioned above, an absence of the Trinity, and nothing but a rigid, unmediated sheer monotheism; or when efforts are made to realize the truth of the Trinity, there arises in religious consciousness a tritheism which is overcome only verbally by the (never denied) confession of God's unity. What is lacking is the awareness of a *mediating principle* which would allow us to conceive of the inner *unity* and unicity and trinity in God, not only in formal static abstractness, or for "God in himself," but also concretely and for us, that is, in some reality which may always be concretely realized in oursleves, in the mystery, which gives itself to us through the Word in the Spirit, and as Word and Spirit.[28]

The two extremes - a 'sheer monotheism' and tritheism - cannot co-exist as the two poles of

trinitarian faith, as if held together paradoxically. The doctrine of the Trinity is not to be

believed because it is absurd, but because the Trinity has a 'real ontological relation' to us.

For Rahner, this relation needs to be facilitated by awareness of a 'mediating principle'.

For St. Augustine and for many theologians in the Latin tradition, creation is the

'mediating principle' which concretely realizes the fact of the Trinity in our own experience.

In creation, God has left behind certain "footprints" (*vestigia*) which have a ternary form[29],

but the perfect vestige, the image of the triune God, is to be found in human beings.[30] To

be fair to Augustine, this relation of creation, and especially human beings, to the Trinity in

Books VIII-XV of *De Trinitate* only takes place after an exegesis of how the Trinity has

saved us in Books I-VII. Still, Rahner rightly identifies this approach as the basis, in

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[28]Rahner, p. 42. n.43.

[29]cf. St. Augustine, De Trinitate. X,viii.

[30]De Trin. XII, vi.

Aquinas, for a kind of 'division' in the doctrine of God between the treatises *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino*.

The doctrine of creation in the medieval period - and especially in the controversies regarding Aristotelianism in the thirteenth century - represents a theological problem of its own. One of the ways in which St. Thomas is able to establish the doctrine of the creation is to lay special emphasis on the unity of the Creator:

> Now it has been shown above (3, 4) when treating of the divine simplicity that God is the essentially self-subsisting Being; and also it was shown (11, 3,4) that subsisting being must be one; as, if whiteness were self-subsisting, it would be one, since whiteness is multiplied by its recipients. Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation. Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly.
> Hence Plato said (Parmen. xxvi) that unity must come before multitude; and Aristotle said (Metaph. ii, text 4) that whatever is greatest in being and greatest in truth, is the cause of every being and of every truth; just as whatever is the greatest in heat is the cause of all heat.[31]

This sort of argument in Aquinas' treatise on creation is made in isolation from what he has said in the treatise on the Trinity. In this instance (i.e. the treatise on the creation, though certainly not in the treatise on the Incarnation) the doctrine of God presented in the treatise *De Deo Uno* has methodological priority over the treatise *De Deo Trino*.

The purpose of the separation of the two treatises makes sense in this original context just as Augustine's use of the doctrine of creation as the 'mediating principle' of the Trinity to our concrete reality makes sense in *De Trinitate*. What is problematic is the way in which the separation of the two treatises and the use of the doctrine of creation as a 'mediating

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[31]*Summa Theologiae,* I,q.44,a.1.

principle' have both become normative in the Western tradition. For Rahner, the relation

between the treatises *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino* constitutes a theological problem:

> And thus one may believe that Christian theology too may and should put a treatise on the one God *before* the treatise on the triune God. But since this approach is justified by the unicity of the divine essence, the only treatise which one writes, or can write, is "on the one divinity." As a result the treatise becomes quite philosophical and abstract and refers hardly at all to salvation history. It speaks of the necessary metaphysical properties of God, and not very explicitly of God as experienced in salvation history in his free relations to his creatures.[32]

Moreover, we place the treatise on the Trinity in 'splendid isolation' "if everything which

matters for us in God has already been said in the treatise *On the One God*"[33] as

sometimes appeared to be the case in neo-scholasticism.

The doctrine of the Incarnation, in itself, is not sufficient to retrieve the treatise on

the Trinity from this place of isolation. In fact, this isolation impairs the doctrine of the

Incarnation:

> From the time of St Augustine it has undoubtedly been customary in the schools to take it for granted that any one of that non-numerical three, whom we call the persons of the one God, could become man, presuming he willed to. On this supposition, the Word of God in the statement made above does not mean much more than any divine subject, a divine *hypostasis*: 'one of the Trinity became man'. On this supposition therefore one needs to know only what is proper to the divine 'Word' himself... For if it is of the essence and meaning of the Word of God that he and he alone is the one who begins and can begin a human history; if indeed God's way of owning the world is that the world is not only his work, a work distinct from him, but becomes his own reality... then it could well be that one only understands incarnation when one

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[32]Rahner, pp. 17-18.

[33]ibid. p. 17.

knows what precisely *Word* of God is.[34]

Rahner's sense that "for the catechism of the head and heart... the Christian's idea of the incarnation would not have to change at all if there were no Trinity"[35] is thus a pastoral problem rooted in a theological one. The lack of a 'mediating principle' between the doctrine of the Trinity and its concrete reality 'for us' is that problem.

The doctrine of creation cannot function as a suitable 'mediating principle' as it does in Augustine. The doctrine of the Incarnation is also unsuitable if we cannot retrieve "specifically, what it means for the Logos, precisely as Logos, as distinct from the other persons, to have become man"[36]. The tendency in the Latin tradition not only to divide the doctrine of God, but to give a methodological priority to the treatise on the one God over the treatise on the Trinity reflects a methodological priority of the doctrine of creation over that of the Incarnation. This methodological priority is rooted in the chronological priority of the one over the other. This chronological priority stems from seeing the two as events in the history of salvation. The answer to the question *"Cur Deus homo?"* for SS. Anselm and Thomas *is* rooted in the history of salvation:

> For such things as spring from God's will, and beyond the creature's due, can be made known to us only through being revealed in the Sacred Scripture, in which the Divine Will is made known to us...
> For if man had not sinned, he would have been endowed with the light of Divine wisdom, and would have been perfected by God with the righteousness of justice in order to know and carry out everything needful. But because man,

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[34]Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation" in <u>Theological Investigations, Vol. IV.</u> (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966) pp. 106-107.

[35]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 11.

[36]<u>ibid.</u>

> on deserting God, had stooped to corporeal things, it was necessary that God should take flesh, and by corporeal things should afford him the remedy of salvation.[37]

Thus, in Anselm and Thomas, the sin of Adam is the condition for the possibility of the Incarnation. The creation is the condition for the possibility of that sin. Thus the creation is, indirectly, the condition for the possibility of the Incarnation. It makes sense to say that a hypostatic union of human and divine natures presupposes the existence of a human nature with which the divine nature might be hypostatically united.

Clearly the Incarnation as an *event* in the history of salvation cannot, in theology, have methodological priority over creation as an *event*. However, there is a way in which the Incarnation should not be understood primarily as an event in history. The Incarnation is not only *in* history, but history belongs to the Incarnation. This is what is differentiated in the contrast between the terms 'history of salvation' and 'salvation history'. Salvation is more than the salvaging of creation; it has this character in contradistinction to the experience of human sin and ruin, but salvation is God's plan for creation, especially human beings. Even if this 'plan' or its 'economy' is experienced by us in its fundamental opposition to our sin, we should not understand sin as its cause. The mystery of salvation - God's relation to the world, God's plan for creation - has its cause in the freedom of God. The existence of divine nature is as much a presupposition for the hypostatic union as the existence of human nature. More importantly the existence of the person of the Logos is a presupposition for both. Just as there can be no union of two natures without two natures to unite, there can be no Incarnation without the hypostasis of the Logos to unite them. The Incarnation - not

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[37]Summa Theologica, III,q.1,a.3.

only of a divine person become man, but of the Logos become flesh - has an ontological

priority over creation because the Logos has an ontological priority over all the things which

the Father has made, in the Spirit, through the Logos:

> Is there anything in Catholic principles to prevent us taking the Scotist point of
> view and considering the primal act of God, in which everything else is in fact
> given, as the self-exteriorization of God who is the love which gives itself in the
> incarnation? And then the order of grace would already be instituted, which
> would (probably) be unthinkable without such a decree of God with regard to
> his personal communication. Are there any valid arguments against the
> position which holds that the *possibility* of creation rests on that of the
> Incarnation, even though the fact of creation (as nature) does not necessarily
> imply the actual realization of the self-exteriorization of God in the
> Incarnation?[38]

One can see how the structure of Aquinas' thought would give a special place to the

chronology of history. For Rahner, this chronology is subsumed by an ontological order

where God is not only the beginning and end of history, but the centrality of being. In this,

Rahner adopts the approach of the Franciscan school:

> everyone who wills in an ordered way first wills the end, and then wills more
> immediately those things which are most closely related to the end: but of all
> willing beings God is the most ordered; therefore it is to be agreed that he
> willed with all due order. But of all things outside of himself, the closest to
> him is the soul of Christ; therefore before any merits or demerits he willed that
> the human nature of Christ be united to him[39]

Scotus' answer to the hypothetical question "Had Adam not sinned would the Word still

have become incarnate?" retains a speculative character which puts it in marked contrast to

Aquinas' insistence on the data of Scripture as a norm. For Rahner, however, the priority of

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[38]Rahner, "Nature and Grace" in Theological Investigations,
Vol. IV. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966) p. 176.

[39]Duns Scotus, Opus Oxoniense. III d.7,q.3,n.3. (translation:
J.Laporte)

the *possibility* of the Incarnation over the *possibility* of creation is not the result of

speculation, but something we know in the experience of grace:

> The Logos who has become part of the world is not merely the *de facto*
> mediator of grace by his merit - which only became necessary because Adam
> had cast this grace away - he is also the person who by his free Incarnation
> creates the order of grace and nature as his own presupposition (nature) and
> his milieu (the grace of the other spiritual creatures). This would enable us, as
> we have already said, to reach a deeper understanding of the immanent
> Trinity.[40]

The 'mediating principle' which would "allow us to conceive of the inner *unity* and

unicity and trinity in God... concretely and for us" is the christological and trinitarian

character of grace as a self-communication of God. We experience the 'real ontological

relation' between us and the Trinity in the experience of grace:

> But we know - when we let ourselves go in this experience of the spirit, when
> the tangible and assignable, the relishable element disappears... when
> everything disappears as if in an inexpressible, as it were white, colourless and
> intangible beatitude - then in actual fact it is not merely the spirit but the Holy
> Spirit who is at work in us. This is the hour of grace... the experiencing of
> grace, i.e. of that visitation by the Holy Spirit of the triune God which has
> become a reality in Christ through his becoming man and through his sacrifice
> on the Cross.[41]

Thus, Rahner is able to integrate the genius of the Scotistic insight while being faithful to

Aquinas' misgiving about speculation concerning what has not been revealed. This

'mediating principle', the experience of grace, has been revealed because "this grace affects

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[40]Rahner, ibid.

[41]Rahner, "Reflections on the Experience of Grace" in
Theological Investigations, Vol. 3. (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965)
pp. 88-89;86.

our conscious life, not just our being but our existence"[42]. Not only does the Trinity have a

real ontological relation to believers, but the offer of this grace, of this self-communication,

"is given to everyone who is a being of unlimited transcendentality as a fulfillment essentially

transcending the natural"[43]. This 'supernatural existential' is the real ontological relation of

the Trinity to human beings. The treatise about the Trinity may find itself in a place of

isolation, but the *Trinity* finds us in the experience of our isolations and our joys and we

experience the Trinity in our being found - in the free acceptance of the Trinity's own self-

communication.

Thus, Rahner's perception of the dilemma between a 'sheer monotheism' and

tritheism stems from the experience many Christians have of the unrelatedness of the

doctrine of the Trinity to their lives. This unrelatedness has its roots most especially in the

separation of the treatises on the one God and on the Trinity in the *Summa Theologiae* of

Aquinas and the way this separation has been made normative in the Western tradition.

The apparent unrelatedness of the Trinity to the lives of believers is really caused by the

isolated place the treatise on the Trinity has been given in theology.

The 'mediating principle' which makes us aware of our 'real ontological relation' to

the Trinity is to be found in our experience of grace. The order of grace is established in

the Incarnation, not as some sort of "new age" inaugurated by the nativity of Christ, but

because God the Father "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly

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[42]Rahner, "Nature and Grace", p. 178.

[43]Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith. p. 127.

places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world"[44].

Whatever difficulties may lie in Rahner's explicit theology of the Trinity, one thing is certain: the real ontological relation of the Trinity to our concrete existence is demonstrated in his theology of grace. This, in turn, is the presupposition for his thesis: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity"[45].

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[44]Eph. 1:3-4.

[45]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 22.

Chapter Two: The 'Economic' Trinity as God's Self-Communication; God's Self-Communication as the 'Immanent' Trinity

The basic presupposition of Rahner's trinitarian theology is his theology of grace. We have seen how, for Rahner, a 'real ontological relation' between human beings and the Trinity is made possible by God's self-communication to us. The offer of this self-communication, the offer of grace, is universal; it is available to all human beings, in all situations, as a 'supernatural existential'. Acceptance of this offer is enabled by grace itself, which *is* truly a *self*-communication of God:

> If one supposes that the immediate vision of God can only be based on a quasi-formal self-communication of God in vision, and not (adequately) on a created quality in the spirit of man; and if one recalls the obvious truth, that each of the three divine persons is the object of immediate intuition in his personal property: then that entitative (ontic) quasiformal communication of God, which takes the place of a *species impressa* as the ontological foundation of man's possession of God in knowledge, must include a non-appropriated relationship of each of the three divine persons to man.[46]

Rahner's insight here depends on the centrality he has given to the Incarnation, not only historically but ontologically. In the Incarnation, God's self-communication is absolute; in Jesus Christ we witness its irrevocable character. Moreover, if this self-communication is truly of *God*, then each of the three divine persons must have a relationship to human beings:

> On this basis, the relation of the 'immanent' to the 'redemptive' Trinity could be thought out anew. And the supreme mystery of the Christian faith could appear more clearly as a reality with which man has to do not merely conceptually (and through the incarnation of the Logos) but also really, in the

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[46]Rahner, "Nature and Grace", p. 175.

> exercise of his life of grace. It could be seen that God is not only trinitarian in himself, but also communicates himself in a trinitarian way, in grace, which means more than efficient causality on the part of God in the line of *creatio ex nihilo* outside himself - though it remains true that where God exercises *efficient* causality, the work is to be attributed to the whole Trinity as one single cause.[47]

This grace is not a created thing which God effects, but *is* God in self-communication; its

threefold character (i.e. "The one God communicates himself in absolute self-utterance and

as absolute donation of love"[48]) must correspond to the reality of God in Godself. In other

words, the intra-trinitarian relations have meaning for us because each of the persons

distinguished by these relations is in relation to us. Without this trinitarian statement,

Rahner's theology of grace, however beautiful, would be undone. Its personal character

depends on its tri-personal character: "the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity."[49]

This first clause of Rahner's basic axiom locates the 'economic' Trinity in salvation

history (especially in the Incarnation and grace) and identifies this Trinity with (not *as*) the

'immanent' Trinity. In no way is this meant to say that the intra-trinitarian relations are *only*

worked out historically as if God depended on some emanationist scheme, or process

theology, to become Godself. This is what Walter Kasper notes by indicating that "this

axiom presupposes knowledge of the immanent Trinity and is meant to interpret and

concretize the immanent Trinity in an appropriate way"[50]. Only in light of this

presupposition does the *vice versa* of the axiom make sense: "the 'immanent' Trinity is the

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[47]*ibid.*

[48]Rahner, *The Trinity.* p. 36.

[49]Rahner, *The Trinity,* p. 22.

[50]Kasper, p. 277.

'economic' Trinity"[51].

Thus, Rahner's axiom is a statement about the Trinity and its 'real ontological relation' to us; it does not mean to delimit the scope or method of theology, as may be the case in some of his admirers:

> We are told [by Schoonenberg] that we can proceed from this world up to God but not in the opposite direction. We can learn about the Trinity from revelation, but we are not to begin from the Trinity and proceed to think about Christ. In brief, theological thought is to observe the traffic laws of a one-way street and, it is claimed, by such obedience Trinitarian doctrine will become concrete, related to human life and relevant to preaching.[52]

Rahner does not create a theological 'one-way street'. His starting point cannot be readily stereotyped as either 'God' or 'the world'. His theological anthropology and his theology of grace constitute a unity. To play one off against the other would be a disservice to Rahner. The concept of mystery governs and unifies the whole of his theology:

> we must always remember that a mystery is not something still undisclosed, which is a second element along with what is grasped and understood. This would be to confuse mystery with the still undiscovered unknown. Mystery on the contrary is the impenetrable which is already present and does not need to be fetched: it is not a second element unmastered only provisionally. It is the indomitable dominant horizon of all understanding, that which makes it possible to understand other things by the fact that it is silently there as the incomprehensible. Mystery is therefore not something provisional which is one day to be done away with or which could in fact be non-mysterious. It is the propriety which always and necessarily characterizes God - and through him, us - so much so, that the immediate vision of God which is promised to us as our fulfilment, is the immediacy of the incomprehensible. It is precisely the removal of the illusion that our lack of total comprehension is only provisional. For in this vision we shall see by God himself and not merely by the infinite poverty of our transcendence that he is incomprehensible. But the vision of

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[51]Rahner, op. cit.

[52]Bernard Lonergan, "Christology Today: Methodological Reflections" in A Third Collection. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985) p. 85.

> the mystery in itself, accepted in *love*, is the bliss of the creature and really makes what is known as mystery the burning bush of the eternally unquenchable flame of love.[53]

Thus, the Trinity is really the "primordial mystery of Christianity"[54] and it is the concept of mystery in Rahner's theology which safeguards God's incomprehensibility. It is not necessary to establish some kind of methodological priority of *oikonomia* over *theologia*. Lonergan's concerns regarding Schoonenberg's theology do not apply here; there is appropriate interplay between the first and the second clauses of the axiom. Rahner's basic axiom, appropriately understood, is helpful to us. The God whom we experience in salvation history, in the Incarnation and grace, really communicates God*self* to us. The identity of the 'economic' with the 'immanent' Trinity does not dissolve the 'immanent' Trinity; neither does the doctrine of the Trinity in the economy of salvation provide us with clues whereby a perspicuous exposition of the mystery might 'solve' the incomprehensibility of God as if it were a problem. Rahner insists, with the heart of the tradition, that the mystery of God remains incomprehensible in the beatific vision. What is a 'problem' is that the mystery, experienced as the 'Whither' of our transcendence, is distant and aloof: "Pilgrim man, still a stranger to the vision of God, can be deceived about the character of absolute mystery in God"[55]. Grace, the self-communication of this nameless holy mystery, ontologically directs us to the vision of this God. The beatific vision does not remove the incomprehensibility of

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[53]Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation", pp. 108-109.

[54]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 21.

[55]Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology" in Theological Investigations, Vol. IV. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966) p. 55.

God as if our eternal destiny were meant to be a gloating discovery of the 'answers' at the back of a book. Rather, it is precisely the mystery which inclines and draws near to us; the incomprehensibility is not removed, but moves toward us. The beatific vision "must mean grasping and being grasped by the mystery"; "it forces knowledge to surpass itself and both preserve and transform itself in a more comprehensive act, that of love"[56]:

> Grace does not imply the promise and the beginning of the elimination of the mystery, but the radical possibility of absolute proximity of the mystery, which is not eliminated by its proximity, but really presented as mystery.[57]

This 'absolute proximity' of "the content of [our] vision and so the bliss of [our] love"[58] is not the elimination, but the final assertion of the mystery.

The difficulty, then, of determining how "each one of the three divine persons communicates himself to man in gratuitous grace in his own personal peculiarity and diversity"[59] can only be understood in the context of Rahner's understanding of the mystery. This 'personal peculiarity and diversity' cannot, in Rahner's theology, eliminate the incomprehensibility of the mystery. What we may expect in Rahner's presentation of the self-revelation of God through Christ in the Spirit is a deeper sense of the 'absolute proximity' of this 'personal peculiarity and diversity' of the three divine persons. As we examine Rahner's trinitarian theology more closely, we must keep this in mind.

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[56]Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology", p. 41, 43.

[57]Rahner, ibid. p. 55.

[58]ibid.

[59]Rahner, The Trinity. pp. 34-35.

Many of the words and terms of the Church's trinitarian tradition do not find their origin in Scripture, but in the controversies and conciliar definitions of the patristic period. Indeed, if such terms as *ousia, esse, substantia, homoousios, hypostasis, persona* were readily discernible in the testimony of Scripture, a kind of biblicism might very well solve most of our problems. To be certain, though, theology's ecclesial vocation and the role of the Church's magisterium in formulating dogmatic definitions are still with us today. The magisterium reserves the right to regulate the use of terms and concepts within the Church, but their extraecclesial use is another thing. To claim authority over language, however theoretically correct, is like the claim of papal sovereignty over the Italian peninsula: a recipe for disappointment. Pius IX may have declared himself "the prisoner of the Vatican". but we may not similarly declare ourselves 'prisoners' of the trinitarian dogma. The evangelical imperative of our mission as trinitarian believers requires that we confront the difficulties of our doctrinal terminology and presentation.

This is why the real problems of trinitarian terminology and language cannot be legislated away. The problems remain. Rahner, particularly, is concerned that the term 'person' has come to mean something in the modern period which was not intended by the magisterium of the early Church. We shall revisit this problem in the next chapter.

For the most part, Rahner excuses himself from the determination of appropriate terms and words. He distinguishes between 'ontic explanations' which seek to explain one thing by referring to another and 'logical explanations' which seek to explain a thing through a more precise definition of the thing itself. Many of the great dogmatic decisions of the Church are examples of 'logical explanation'. The use of *ousia* or *substantia* to speak of the

unity of God, *hypostases* or *personae* to speak of what is non-numerically three in God, or

homoousios to speak of the relation between the non-numerically three - these are examples

of 'logical explanation'.

These 'logical explanations' may be binding for Catholic theology, but "for its meaning

and interpretation, such a formula always looks back to the words of Scripture (or of the

original tradition)"[60]. Such formulae do not preclude interpretation; they may even require

it.

We have seen the problem, for Rahner, of placing a treatise on the one God before a

treatise on the Trinity. Since Rahner's treatise is not only on the Trinity, but on the Trinity

as a mystery of salvation, he has no need to reiterate the traditional theses of the treatise *De

Deo Uno*. What Rahner does is presuppose these theses; they are implicit in what he has to

say about God's self-communication in the economy of salvation. His intention to

'reintroduce' the *monarchia* of the Father into trinitarian theology makes this almost

rhetorically necessary. He cannot have the Father as the principle of the Trinity's unity

competing with concepts like 'essence' or 'substance', however much he considers such

concepts adequate:

> Concretely it is hardly conceivable that the concepts of 'essence' and
> 'substance', in their most formal meaning, should eventually be replaced by
> better concepts. Yet it is possible that, in another conceptual framework,
> whether pre-scientific or derived from philosophical reflexion, a few aspects
> may come out more clearly than hitherto. Such concepts would then be better
> suited for the trinitarian dogma. Of this kind would be concepts that are less
> static, more onto-*logical*, referring more to a spiritual rather than to a thinglike

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[60]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 54.

reality.[61]

What Rahner will propose in his essay are not so much concepts, 'derived from philosophical reflexion', but the recovery of a 'pre-scientific' tradition (and, more importantly, a pre-Augustinian one) which uses the *taxis* apparent in the economy of salvation to articulate a doctrine of the immanent Trinity.

The systematic presentation of Rahner's trinitarian theology has two parts: (1) a summary of official trinitarian doctrine, and (2) an outline of his trinitarian theology. Rahner's basic axiom both presupposes and anticipates the doctrines of the Incarnation and of grace. We have seen how Rahner bemoans the separation of the treatises *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino* and how he elects to bypass the language of 'essence' and 'substance'. His starting point, then, "is the one God who is, and insofar as he is the Father"[62].

Taking the biblical data as his norm, Rahner maintains:

> that in the New Testament *ho theos signifies* the First Person of the Trinity, and does not merely stand for him often; and this applies to every case in which another meaning of *ho theos* is not clearly evident from the context. These few exceptions in no way support the opinion that *ho theos* merely stands for the Father without actually signifying him.[63]

Now there is nothing new in what Rahner is saying, but as a point of differentiation from Neo-scholasticism it is most important. 'God' as a name for the 'Father' is common in the

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[61]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 56.

[62]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 58.

[63]Rahner, "Theos in the New Testament" in Theological Investigations, Vol. I. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961) pp. 126-127.

New Testament, an inversion of the manner in which 'Father' had been a metaphorical way

of speaking about 'God'. The father of Jesus Christ, the one whom he intimately calls

'Abba' in the gospels, is the one whom the New Testament calls 'God':

> Not every objectively true statement is also kerygmatically correct. For
> example, it is true, objectively speaking, that when Jesus prayed as man, he
> prayed to the three divine Persons. Yet kerygmatically it would be incorrect to
> dwell on the fact that Jesus worshipped the Son of God. So if we ask which
> theologically true statements are also kerygmatic, we shall always have to
> orientate ourselves by references to modes of expression current in the New
> Testament (though not to them alone). It is only in this way that we shall
> avoid the danger of bringing things into the foreground of a human
> consciousness which is always finite, of emphasizing connexions and
> relationships, which conceal or at least push into the background the more
> important view of revealed reality, that which is of ultimate significance for the
> working out of salvation.[64]

The distinction which Rahner makes between an 'objectively true statement' and one which

is 'kerygmatically correct' is important here. He does not deny the traditional teaching of

the Church; rather he highlights the intention of the biblical text. Just as the patristic

development of christology and pneumatology was an ongoing attempt to take into the

account of our hope what the New Testament says about the Son and the Holy Spirit, we

need to acknowledge a similar development in the theology of the fatherhood of God. If

theos is used rarely in descriptions of the Son, we have a further basis for saying that *ho*

theos signifies the Father: "it is only slowly, as it were shyly and cautiously, that the

expression is detached from him and evolves in such a way that a few texts... venture to use

it of Christ"[65].

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[64]Rahner, "Theos in the New Testament", p. 128-129.

[65]Rahner, "Theos in the New Testament", p. 138.

God the Father is already known as the "concrete partner"[66] of the old covenant

whose Son and Spirit we only find out about through the event of the New Testament. This

already identifies a "notional property"[67] of the triune God which does not derive from the

relations 'within' the Godhead:

> The experience of God in revelation, together with the transcendental moment
> of the dynamism of the created spirit towards God, intends originally and
> necessarily the *concrete* God, and him as necessarily, simply, and absolutely
> *unoriginate...* this concrete unoriginate one is precisely he who, as soon as this
> knowledge is available, is the Father.[68]

For Rahner, then, it is possible to speak of a history of pre-trinitarian revelation 'before' the

Son and Spirit were sent. Because the Father is this concrete and unoriginate one, he

cannot be 'sent', but is the one who sends. When we interpret our experience of the holy

mystery as encounter with a seemingly distant and aloof namelessness, we are encountering

the Father without knowing him as Father. We cannot know him as Father unless we know

the one(s) whom he has sent; to know the one(s) whom he has sent is to know *him* in his

self-communication: "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do

know him and have seen him."[69]

Now if we recognize the Father as the "absolutely unoriginate"[70] in his free self-

communication in the economy of salvation, we have a 'reason' for speaking of the Son and

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[66]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 59.

[67]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 79.

[68]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> pp. 59-60.

[69]John 14:7 (NRSV)

[70]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 59.

the Holy Spirit. Herein lies the possible danger of Rahner's approach. We must be able to

speak simultaneously of the Father's self-communication and his unoriginateness. If then the

generation of the Logos seems to be the instrument whereby the Father can be self-

communicating while "keeping to himself"[71], we have the same difficulty the Greek

apologists of the second century had in the formulation of the Logos doctrine.[72] Rahner,

as we have seen, has already insisted that the pre-existence of this Logos-communicating

self-communication is the condition for the possibility of a Logos-communicating self-

communication in the hypostatic union. This already safeguards against looking at the

situation backwards wherein the world is somehow the reason for the Father's utterance. A

'descending christology' interprets an 'ascending christology'. Rahner's christology shows how

"man is possible because the exteriorization of the Logos is possible"[73]. What remains to

be seen, however, is the meaning of the generation of the Logos in the Godhead. One

suspects that it may be precisely what happens when the Father wills to be simultaneously

self-communicating and 'keeping to himself', but how does one keep such a notion from too

'instrumental' an understanding of the Logos? This problem is compounded by the

conclusions Rahner draws from the fact that the Father and Son are "only relatively

distinct"[74]: "The Logos is not the one who utters, but the one who is uttered. And there is

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[71]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 64.

[72]Today, it is still necessary to distinguish the Logos from a demiurge who can only ever be a subordinate instrument.

[73]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 33.

[74]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 68.

properly no *mutual* love between Father and Son"[75]. The Son, who in our piety and our

history takes an active role in our salvation, appears passive in the 'immanent' Trinity. Thus,

the active personhood of the Logos is 'kept' until it is 'sent': "The Word is, by definition,

immanent in the divinity *and* active in the world, and as such the Father's revelation"[76]. Is

it not possible that even our proclamation of the 'immanent' Trinity should be more

'kerygmatically correct'? This is not so much an argument against Rahner's position as a

pre-critical reaction (that of a "kerygmatist"[77], to be sure) to a difficulty in his trinitarian

theology. This difficulty might be articulated thus: if the Logos appears to be merely

instrumental to the Father's self-communication and, before the Incarnation, 'passive', how

can we speak of Christ as subject?

Rahner's concern is opposite to the one we have raised here. He does not raise the

problem of a passive and instrumental Logos in the 'immanent' Trinity. Rather, his concern

is to avoid a passive and purely instrumental understanding of the humanity of Christ in the

hypostatic union. The need here is to avoid a practical monophysitism which would absorb

the humanity of Christ mythologically:

> The idea exists that God disguises himself as a man, or that needing to make
> himself visible, he makes gestures by means of a human reality which is used in
> such a way that it is not a real man with independence and freedom, but a
> puppet on strings which the player behind the scenes uses to make himself audible.[78]

Rahner also rejects the heretical notion that somehow in the unity of the one person of

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[75]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 106.

[76]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 29.

[77]cf. Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 48.

[78]Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation", p. 118.

Christ there is a 'double moral person'. Such a double subject would be a split personality,

providing satisfaction to himself. Thus, we are left with Rahner's emphasis on the freedom

and independence of the man Jesus; this emphasis precludes the possibility of a mythological

and heretical understanding of the hypostatic union:

> If this danger [i.e. the mythological understanding] is really avoided by
> asserting a conscious relationship of the man Jesus with respect to God, and by
> asserting it in such a way that the assertion of the distinctively unique character
> of this relationship is *eo ipso* an implicit or explicit assertion of the *unio
> hypostatica*; then the Scriptural accounts of Jesus' conscious dispositions to the
> Father would be translated into theological Christology. We need only
> consider the following two statements to see this.
> a. 'The Logos, who possesses in identity the absolute divine being,
> assumes a human nature as his own and thus becomes man while remaining
> himself.' b. 'This man - who, as we have said, is God - can pray, adore, be
> obedient, feel in a creaturely way to the point of abandonment by God, can
> weep, receive the wonderful gift of "being heard", experience the claims of
> God's will upon him as something authoritative and alien,' and so on. Does
> the second statement always come immediately to mind as soon as the first,
> which is a formula of faith and, it goes without saying, a true one, is
> uttered?[79]

Rahner's emphasis on the second statement is his principal concern. He wishes to maintain

the reality of the Incarnation and the real mediatorship of Christ against any possible

misunderstanding. For him, the first statement 'goes without saying', but this raises the

possibility of a different misunderstanding. If 'person' means a distinct consciousness or

center of activity which, in Christ, there is one of and if we seek to preserve the freedom

and independence of the man Jesus, we might be misled into thinking that the one person of

Christ is a human person who is constituted as the self-communication of God through the

hypostatic union. In such a case, the Logos 'becomes' flesh and empties himself not only of

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[79]Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology" in _Theological Investigations, Vol. I._ (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961) p. 173.

his divine prerogatives, but of his personhood; if such were true, the Logos would no longer be the Logos and could not be the self-communication of the Father. This misunderstanding in no way represents Rahner's position. His 'first statement' precludes such an interpretation, but because his emphasis is on the second statement in such a way that the first statement 'goes without saying', we need to be careful. And since, as we have seen in the 'immanent' Trinity, the Logos could be misconstrued as a passive instrument-in-waiting - whose relation with the Father is not marked by *mutual* love - we need to be even more careful. Rahner's approach would seem to suggest that an 'I-Thou' relationship exists from the Son to the Father only in the hypostatic union, as that of creature to Creator.[80] This highlights the theological underpinnings of the suspicion he brings to the concept 'person'. Despite the possible validity of such a suspicion, we must also recognize that it is precisely the concept 'person' - *especially* in the modern sense - which might prevent a misunderstanding of Rahner's position on the hypostatic union.

We must strenuously avoid subordinating the personhood of the Logos to that of the Father in the 'immanent' Trinity and dissolving the personhood of the Logos in the freedom and independence of Christ's human nature. Rahner cannot be accused of subordinationism or adoptionism, but he can be accused of failing to *strenuously* avoid these. We must, however, consider this failure in its context. In the Catholic milieu of the 1950s, the personhood of the Logos - especially in the hypostatic union - went 'without saying'. All we really see in Rahner's "failure" is that, in our own time, the situation has changed. This difficulty will be highlighted when we examine Moltmann's critique of Rahner.

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[80]cf. Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 76. n. 30.

If Rahner's presentation of the personhood of the Logos includes some difficulties for us, it is also true that these are compensated for by the strength of his christology. For Rahner, the 'immanent' Logos is the presupposition necessary for speaking about the 'economic' Logos. And because of what we believe about the Logos in the economy of salvation, we cannot comprehensively treat the one without the other:

> It remains true forever that, if in a doctrine of the divine persons we have to say of the Logos himself all that which is and remains real in him, this doctrine implies itself an "economic" statement.[81]

This need not be, for a Christian, an unfortunate thing; it may be the cause of a deeper sense of the mediatorship of Christ and the saving will of the Father.

One needs to be careful in taking these difficulties out of the whole context of Rahner's theology, marked as it is by the effort to renew and emphasize forgotten elements of the tradition. If one, for example, were to feel shocked at the 'high' character of Rahner's theological anthropology (without understanding its relationship to his christology), one might fail to see that this 'high' anthropology entirely depends on an even 'higher' christology. Rahner is not a liberal who decreases Christ so that we might increase, but a Catholic who proclaims Christ so that we might reign with him. Similarly, if there is an element in his doctrine of God which, taken out of context, seems to subordinate the Son, we have to instantly remind ourselves that this self-communicated Logos *is* the Father's self-communication. If the Logos is truly subordinate, there can be no *self*-communication and the whole of Rahner's theology collapses. We may remain unsatisfied as to the lack of a speculative trinitarian theology which would spell out in more detail the relation between the

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[81]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 24. n. 19.

Father and the Son, but such dissatisfaction is an altogether different thing from the

suspicion of 'subordinationism'. As we have said, Rahner's purpose is to avoid a speculative

approach in order to show the 'real ontological relation' of the Trinity to us. In order to

understand the relation between Rahner's approach and a more speculative one, we need to

examine his critique of the 'psychological doctrine' of the Trinity; this we shall do later.

While Rahner's articulation of the freedom and independence of the man Jesus helps

us to avoid a mythological notion of God's self-communication (which, indeed, could not be

self-communication), what is important to our purpose is the relation of the Logos to human

beings. The Logos has a relation to human nature in the hypostatic union, and this relation

is "an intrinsic moment within the whole process by which grace is bestowed upon all

spiritual creatures"[82]. This intrinsic moment is an absolute self-communication of God

which in turn makes possible the "absolute self-transcendence of the spirit into God"[83].

This in no way reduces Jesus to a metaphor for human potential:

> If, therefore, the reality of Jesus, in whom as offer and as acceptance God's
> absolute self-communication to the whole human race "is present" for us, is
> really to be the unsurpassable and definitive offer and acceptance, then we
> have to say: it is not only established by God, but it is God himself.[84]

Again the concept of God's self-communication is central here. Walter Kasper is concerned

that in Rahner's theology of the hypostatic union "it is not so clear that in the man Jesus

Christ God is not only present in a unique and unsurpassable way but that in addition Jesus

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[82]Rahner, <u>Foundations of Christian Faith.</u> p. 201.

[83]<u>ibid</u>.

[84]Rahner, <u>Foundations of Christian Faith.</u> p. 202.

Christ *is* the Son of God"[85]. This may not be fair; Rahner, like Bonaventure, attributes "a

great metaphysical importance to the exemplary cause"[86]. Jesus cannot be this absolute

self-communication of God unless he is God himself and one cannot travel very far in

Rahner's theology without learning that Jesus as God himself could only be the person of

the Logos:

> Should it be true [i.e. that another divine person may have become incarnate],
> and not merely mentioned at the fringe of theological thinking, but really
> presented in earnest, it would create havoc with theology. There would no
> longer be any connection between 'mission' and the intra-trinitarian life. Our
> sonship in grace would in fact have absolutely nothing to do with the Son's
> sonship... we cling to the truth that the Logos is really as he appears in
> revelation, that he is *the one* who reveals to us (not merely *one* of those who
> might have revealed to us) the triune God, on account of the personal being
> which belongs exclusively to him, the Father's Logos.[87]

The non-appropriated relation of the Logos to each human being is revealed in the relation

of the Logos to the human nature of Jesus in the hypostatic union. For Rahner, the

Incarnation is an "instance of a more comprehensive reality"[88] for both God and human

beings. It is such for God because "such a relation entails the possibility of a real

communication, in salvation history, of the whole Trinity as such to the world, therefore the

identity of the economic and the immanent Trinity."[89] For human beings, as we have seen,

the Incarnation is "an intrinsic moment within the whole process by which grace is bestowed

upon all spiritual creatures". As such, it is the "concrete tangibility" of an "irrevocable

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[85]Kasper, p. 303.

[86]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 10. n. 5.

[87]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 30.

[88]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 24.

[89]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 27.

reality" - in other words, a promise.

This promise of our own glorification is not to be understood as the promise that we too will have a hypostatic union. This would be saying that the relation of the Logos to each human being is yet to be achieved (except in Christ, as a model) and that when it is achieved we will all, each one of us, have our natures hypostatically united to the divine Logos. This is not anything like what Christians believe. What is offered to us because of the Incarnation is that which is communicated to the human nature of Christ in the hypostatic union. However, to the human nature of Christ, this self-communication of God is the Father's Logos; for us, this offer of God's self-communication is the Father's Logos become flesh in the man Jesus of Nazareth:

> This union is distinguished from our grace... by the fact that Jesus is the offer
> for us, and we ourselves are not once again the offer, but the recipients of
> God's offer to us.[90]

Thus, the non-appropriated relation of the second person of the Trinity to each human being is based on the Incarnation. Because of the Incarnation we may speak of a supernatural existential, grace 'added' to our nature, which we encounter in the horizon of our transcendence as 'offer'. Because of the Incarnation we may 'accept' this offer 'anonymously' or in its "full historical dimension" by explicit faith in Jesus as the Christ and baptism in the name of the triune God.

Rahner's theology of God's 'economic' self-communication in the Incarnation has a strength which may preclude a similarly detailed account of the "mission" of the Holy Spirit.

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[90]Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith. p. 202.

Like the Incarnation, this mission is a 'dogmatically certain reality'; but unlike the

dogmatically certain reality of the Son's non-appropriated relation to us (as mediator), the

non-appropriated relation of the Spirit to *each* human being is less clear:

> with few exceptions the Scholastic theologians have asserted that, despite what
> scripture suggests, we may not speak of a personal indwelling of the Holy
> Spirit in Christians; according to most Scholastics scripture justifies only an
> indwelling that belongs to God as such and therefore to all three persons and
> that is only imputed (appropriated) to the Holy Spirit.[91]

Rahner wants to show this non-appropriated relation in grace. The Holy Spirit is precisely

what he means when he speaks of "uncreated grace"; what is unclear, however, is whether or

not - in speaking of God's self-communication as uncreated grace - the Holy Spirit is

precisely _who_ Rahner means. The *filioque*, which Rahner does not (or cannot) contradict,

precludes the same clarity which the Incarnation has as the self-communication of the

Father. Rahner's trinitarian theology is marked by a problematic simultaneity of the

Father's monarchy and the Holy Spirit's procession from the Father and the Son. He is

keen to adopt the formula of the Council of Florence, "through the Son", but the Holy

Spirit's openness to the world in a non-appropriated relation to human beings gets bogged

down by a further Western idea, the Spirit as love "between" the Father and the Son. Even

though Rahner doubts a mutual love in the 'immanent' Trinity as a reciprocal 'I-Thou'[92], he

appropriates the idea as the mutual love between the Father and his self-manifestation who

is the Son:

> The Father gives himself to us too as *Father*, that is precisely because and
> insofar as he himself, being essentially with *himself*, utters himself and *in this*

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[91]Kasper, p. 275.

[92]cf. Rahner, The Trinity. p. 76. n. 30.

> *way* communicates the Son as his own, personal self-manifestation; and
> because and insofar as the Father and the Son (receiving from the Father),
> welcoming each other in love, drawn and returning to each other,
> communicate themselves *in this way*, as received in mutual love, that is, as
> Holy Spirit.[93]

Thus, as in his understanding of the 'immanent' Logos as 'passive', Rahner's presentation of

the 'immanent' Spirit lacks a clear notion of personal identity. The Holy Spirit's personal

identity seems swallowed up in the relation of the Father and the Son. We have seen how a

similar difficulty regarding the personhood of the Logos is overcome, at least provisionally,

by the freedom and independence of the man Jesus. In the case of the Holy Spirit, we

cannot speak of a hypostatic union which would clearly provide us with a dogmatically

certain instance of the Spirit's personal identity:

> The starting point is the experience of faith, which makes us aware that,
> through what we call "Holy Spirit", God (hence the Father) *really*
> communicates *himself* as love and forgiveness, that he produces this self-
> communication in us and maintains it by himself. Hence the "Spirit" must be
> God himself.[94]

The non-appropriated relation of the Holy Spirit to a human being rests on the fact that the

Holy Spirit is a self-communication of God. We know the Holy Spirit's personal identity as

a dogmatically certain reality; it is the clear articulation of its *meaning* which is incomplete.

Unlike the personal identity of the Son, the personal identity of the Spirit does not appear to

us as a "concrete tangibility".

This does not mean Rahner fails to present clearly the mission of the Holy Spirit. On

the contrary, his theology of the Holy Spirit emphasizes that love by which God's self-

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[93]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 35.

[94]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 67.

communication is revealed and enables its own acceptance. It is true that when this happens

- and it also happens in those who are, according to Rahner, "anonymous Christians" - the

Holy Spirit has a non-appropriated relation to each human being. This does not necessarily

'explain' why the Holy Spirit is a divine person, but it does show how in the Spirit the

incomprehensible mystery draws near to us. The 'peculiarity' of the Spirit's relation to us

has been shown, but its 'personal peculiarity' remains unclear. Since Rahner (as we shall

see) mistrusts too free a use of the concept 'person', we are left trying to imagine a non-

appropriated relation to this divine 'person' without a clear notion of his personhood.

However, this is consistent with Rahner's approach; the self-communication of God which

belongs to the nature of the Son is given to us through grace in the Holy Spirit as the

mystery of the one God:

> The three mysteries, the Trinity with its two processions, and the two self-
> communications of God *ad extra* in a real formal causality corresponding to the
> two processions, are not 'intermediate mysteries'. They are not something
> provisional and deficient in the line of mystery which comes between the
> perspicuous truths of our natural knowledge and the absolute mystery of God...
> But they signify the articulation of the one single mystery of God, being the
> radical form of his one comprehensive mysteriousness...[95]

The Spirit is a modality of the self-communication of this one comprehensive

mysteriousness, but is also distinct in Godself:

> This reality of salvation history is not only modally, that is, subsequently, on
> account of its recipient, but of itself, and despite its real divine character,
> distinct from the Father who gives and from the Son who mediates. We
> demonstrate this, according to our fundamental trinitarian axiom, through the
> fact that the concrete Christ distinguishes this gift from himself not only with

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[95]Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology", p. 72.

respect to God (the Father) but also with respect to those who receive the Spirit.[96]

Thus, God communicates Godself in two ways, in the Son and in the Spirit. Neither do these ways mean the same thing nor are they two, unrelated 'facticities'. Rather, they are "moments, innerly related to each other, yet distinct from one another, of the *one* self-communication of God"[97].

Rahner's understanding of how the one self-communication of God is a trinitarian self-communication rests on this 'inner unity' or correspondence between the way the self-communication takes place in Christ and in the Spirit. Because of what we have experienced in salvation history and the authenticity of our trinitarian faith, we must suppose a reason both for their differentiation and essential unity:

> We suppose that, when God freely steps outside of himself in *self-communication* (not merely through creation, positing other realities which are not himself), it is and must be the Son who appears historically in the flesh as man. And it is and must be the Spirit who brings about the acceptance by the world (as creation) in faith, hope and love of this self-communication. Insofar as this one self-communication of God, which occurs necessarily in these two complementary aspects, is *free*, the incarnation and the descent of God's Spirit are free, even though the connection between these two moments is necessary.[98]

Such a connection is necessary if we are to understand these events as part of the unity of the economy of salvation. In turn, the unity of the economy is the unity of God's self-communication *for us*. Thus, we may presuppose this unified self-communication and

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[96]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 68.

[97]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> pp. 84-85.

[98]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 86.

proceed to what Rahner calls its 'fourfold group of aspects': (1) Origin-Future; (2) History-Transcendence; (3) Invitation-Acceptance; (4) Knowledge-Love.

Rahner is the first to admit that there is nothing numerological or inevitable about these four groups. He is convinced, however, that they do serve to illustrate a corresponding doubleness to God's self-communication. Since we are creatures and human beings, they are apparent to us 'from below', as it were.

These aspects of God's self-communication, because they presuppose this self-communication also presuppose an 'addressee' who receives this communication. There is no communication otherwise. We also presuppose the *milieu* of both the addressee and the self-communication, one which they share as the condition for its possibility: "If God wishes to freely step outside of himself, he must create man."[99]

Because we exist temporally, we experience this self-communication both as *origin* and as *future*. The 'vestige' (if Rahner will forgive me) of this origin remains with us because we remain with ourselves in the creatureliness by which we were constituted for this self-communication. This origin is the condition for the possibility of a future which aims at "the total communication of God"[100]. This is what Augustine means when he says: "you have made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you"[101].

Similarly, but not so much because of our temporal nature as our existential condition we perceive, again from below, the aspects of *history* and *transcendence*. From Rahner's

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[99]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> pp. 89-90.

[100]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 91.

[101]St. Augustine, <u>Confessions.</u> I,i.

theology of grace, a human being is "concrete object", but there is the "horizon within which this object comes to stand". This transcendence is not an "imageless mysticism", but is "seen and found in the object itself".[102] A human being is an 'event', but an event of God's self-communication. Thus 'free' not only characterizes God's self-communication, but the possibility of our "history into transcendence". Our self-transcendence is not an inevitability which confiscates our will, but a possibility because of our transcendent nature in history.

This is why God's self-communication must "mean the difference between *offer* and *acceptance*". Not only the offer of salvation, but its free acceptance by its addressee is a moment of the self-communication of God "who gives himself in such a way that his self-donation is accepted in freedom"[103].

Now each of these pairs has a unity and the first aspects of each grouping - i.e. origin, history, offer - appear as a unity. The second aspects of each grouping also share a unity though each is a different 'moment'. Indeed, each is succeeded by the other, but as such their order is transcendence, acceptance, future.

The connections are less easy, though no less important, to make with our last pair, *knowledge* and *love*. The actuation of truth and the actuation of love are corresponding moments not in the same manner as the first three pairs, but because "in their duality they describe the reality of man. Hence a self-communication of God to man must present itself

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[102]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 92.

[103]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 93.

to man as a self-communication of absolute truth and absolute love."[104]

Thus, Rahner's understanding of God's self-communication - of which a human being is an 'event' - has two fundamental 'modalities'. These are not only apparent in the history of salvation, in the sending of the Son and the Spirit, but these 'sendings' (these modalities) correspond to aspects of God's self-communication in human beings as the event of this self-communication. The concept of mystery which governs our understanding of these modalities precludes us from making any modalistic statements about them. What is apparent from these many aspects of God's self-communication is the unity of that self-communication:

> History as concrete, in which the irrevocability of the divine self-communication is made apparent, and transcendence towards the absolute future, are opposites, and as such they keep the one divine self-communication separated in their modalities. But this historic manifestation as truth can be perceived only in the horizon of transcendence towards God's absolute future; this absolute future is irrevocably promised as love by the fact that this promise is established in concrete history (of "the absolute bringer of salvation"). Insofar as these two statements are true, the two modalities of divine self-communication are not separated, nor are they tied together simply by divine decree. They constitute the one divine self-communication which assumes the form of truth in history, of origin and offer, of love in transcendence towards the freely accepted absolute future.[105]

These aspects which are constituted by the two fundamental modalities of God's self-communication are a description "from below". In itself, this description is not the whole of Rahner's trinitarian theology. If it were, one would have difficulty exonerating his theology from the charge of modalism. The value of this description, then, is to be understood with everything that is contained in Rahner's christology, his theology of grace and his theology of

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[104]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 94.

[105]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 98.

the fatherhood of God. Its value is apparent in that it provides an important component of the 'real ontological relation' the Trinity has with us. There is not only a trinitarianism in the 'events' of the history of salvation, but the triune God is self-communicating to each one of us as a personal recipient. Rahner's anthropology is fully a theological, trinitarian anthropology.

Rahner's trinitarian theology is less successful in demonstrating a relation between each divine person and each human being in 'personal peculiarity and diversity'. The Father's relation to us appears as the organizing principle of the one self-communication which complicates our ability to distinguish between this relation and that of the Son and the Spirit to us. Jesus Christ mediates this relation, and this - in itself - is a relation; but even though it is clear that only the Logos could have become incarnate, it is less clear (though not necessarily unclear) how this is the *personal* relation of the 'Logos' to each human being. Is Jesus a divine person or a human person? If his personhood is human, our relation to the Logos remains unclear. The vagueness in the personhood of the "preincarnate Logos" (a term which Rahner would invariably have seen as a detachment of the "immanent character of the Word from the salvific"[106]) may be overcome by the 'concrete tangibility' of the person of Jesus, but such vagueness remains in the case of the Holy Spirit. Maybe such vagueness is kerygmatically correct since the Spirit is a 'modality' of the one self-communication of the absolute mystery, but then maybe it is possible to show the 'personal' relationship of the Holy Spirit to each human being without compromising that mystery.

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[106]Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology", p. 71.

Rahner does succeed in showing the proximity of the Spirit to each human being in the grace which enables our "acceptance" of God's "offer" and this proximity, this nearness, is a relationship. What remains to be seen explicitly, however, is the 'personal' nature of that relationship. We cannot simply invoke these 'modalities' as "self-communications" of the Father and have their 'personal peculiarity and diversity' guaranteed, but one is hard-pressed to do better than Rahner in this regard. Still, this area constitutes the basic weakness of his trinitarian theology:

> Since in Rahner's theology of the Trinity everything focuses on the relation and unity of God and man, there is really no room left for the relations and unity of the trinitarian persons themselves. They are moments in the economic self-communication of God to man, but not subjects of an immanent self-communication. Rahner does succeed in showing more clearly than Scholasticism has done the inalienable function of each of the three divine 'persons' in the history of salvation. He repeatedly attacks the view that in the abstract each of the three persons could have become man. But he does not succeed in arguing back from this to the immanent properties of the persons. His trinitarian speculation thus stops short of the goal; it is unable to show clearly in what the special character and difference of each hypostasis consists and what comprehensible meaning each has. Nor may one say that from an existential and soteriological standpoint such questions are simply an unimportant theological parlor game. For if the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, then deficiencies in the doctrine of the immanent Trinity must necessarily influence the understanding of the Trinity in the history of salvation. If the divine hypostases in God are not subjects, then they cannot speak and act as subjects in the history of salvation.[107]

Kasper's remarks here illustrate the central weakness of Rahner's trinitarian theology: an unwillingness to clearly articulate the personhood of the Son and the Spirit in the immanent Trinity frustrates the demonstration of our 'real ontological relation' to each divine hypostases in the economy of salvation. This creates the real possibility that the distinctions

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[107]Kasper, p. 302-303.

within the Godhead may appear blurred:

> there exists in God only *one* power, *one* will, only one self-presence, a unique activity, a unique beatitude, and so forth. Hence self-awareness is not a moment which distinguishes the divine "persons" one from the other, even though each divine "person", as concrete, possesses a self-consciousness. Whatever would mean three "subjectivities" must be carefully kept away from the concept of person in the present context.[108]

Rahner wishes to avoid any distinction of the hypostases which would distinguish three subjects or, even, three "subjectivities". The modern meaning of the concept 'person', according to Rahner, implies what we mean when we say three subjects or three "subjectivities". Thus, Rahner needs a different concept - an "explanatory concept" - which might help him to make the distinction between what have traditionally been called the 'persons' of the Trinity while avoiding tritheism. This is key to the question as to whether or not Rahner's trinitarian theology is modalistic. If the distinctions in the Trinity (especially the 'immanent' Trinity) cannot be made appropriately, then we are only left with two modalities of God's self-communication. This is economic Sabellianism. Rahner knows this and even establishes those criteria by which his theology may be adjudged modalistic:

> The "threefoldness" of God's relation to us in Christ's order of grace is already the reality of God as it is in itself: a three-personal one. This statement would constitute Sabellianism or modalism only if the following conditions were fulfilled: if it totally ignored the fact that this modality is one of radical *self-manifestation* in uncreated grace and in the hypostatic union; if it claimed that God himself is so little affected by this relation that this "diversity" would, as in creation and in God's natural relation to the world, bring about no difference in God, only a difference in his creatures.[109]

There is, however, a third criterion by which Rahner's theology may be adjudged modalistic:

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[108]Rahner, The Trinity. pp. 75-76.

[109]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 38.

if that terminology by which Rahner distinguishes the divine hypostases one from the other fails to admit the real distinction between them, this theology is modalistic. The incomprehensibility of the absolute mystery cannot preserve this theology from modalism if in its explicit treatment of the distinctions between the "persons", it fails to make those distinctions. In the next chapter, we shall consider Rahner's evaluation of the concept 'person' and his proposal for an explanatory concept which would, on the one hand, make the distinctions necessary to an orthodox defense against modalism while, at the same time, avoiding a temptation to tritheism.

Chapter Three: **The Problem of the Latin Tradition**

Karl Rahner's trinitarian theology is marked by a preference for the Greek

theological tradition as a means of overcoming the limitations and difficulties inherent in the

Latin tradition. The starting point for his exposition of the trinitarian dogma is not the

'essence' or the 'processions', but God the Father whose one self-communication - in two

modalities - constitutes the history of human beings as *salvation* history. Not only is the *taxis*

of God's self-communication an indication of God in Godself, but this self-communication

represents a real ontological relation between each divine 'person' and each human being.

If these 'relations' appear vague to his readers, it is because they are bounded on the

one side by the singularity of the absolute mystery and on the other, by the modern

expectation of a "spiritual-subjective element in the concept of person"[110]:

> He who starts with this false opinion may verbally protest to the contrary, may
> emphasize the mysterious character of the Trinity, may know of the logical
> difficulties in reconciling three 'persons' with God's unity. Despite all this he
> will have great trouble avoiding a *hidden* pre-reflective tritheism.[111]

For Rahner, this expectation of what 'person' means in the modern context must be

separated from the meaning of 'person' in the traditional doctrine of the Church. Rahner

does not reject the concept of 'person' for distinguishing the non-numerical three in God,

but he does reject the use of the modern sense of 'person' in trinitarian discourse.

Now one may question whether or not 'person' in the modern sense is so univocal a

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[110]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 108.

[111]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 115.

concept as to be a serious threat to trinitarian discourse. One may also wonder how a

concept whose theological origins are tinged with modalism[112] can possibly threaten us

with a 'hidden pre-reflective tritheism'. Still, it is Rahner's opinion that the modern sense of

the concept 'person' needs to be removed from trinitarian discourse and its appropriate,

trinitarian sense recovered. Walter Kasper distinguishes these two senses as 'psychological'

(what Rahner calls the modern sense) and 'ontological' (the patristic and medieval

sense).[113] Rahner's central concern with the concept 'person' is precisely its psychological

meaning:

> There is only one real consciousness in God which is shared by Father, Son,
> and Spirit, by each in his own proper way. Hence the threefold subsistence is
> not qualified by three consciousnesses. The "subsistence" itself is as such not
> "personal", if we understand this word in the modern sense. The "distinctness"
> of the persons is not constituted by a distinctness of conscious subjectivities,
> nor does it include the latter. This distinctness is conscious. However, it is not
> conscious for three subjectivities, but it is the awareness of this distinctness in
> one only real consciousness.[114]

Thus, Rahner upholds the traditional axiom of a single consciousness in God and allows that

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[112]cf. W.H.C. Frend, The Early Church. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1965) p. 113. Or consider St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration XXI, 35: "the Italians mean the same, but, owing to the scantiness of their vocabulary, and its poverty of terms, they are unable to distinguish between Essence and Hypostases, and therefore introduce the term Persons, to avoid being understood to assert three Essences. The result, were it not piteous, would be laughable. This slight difference of sound was taken to indicate a difference of faith. Then, Sabellianism was suspected in the doctrine of Three Persons, Arianism in that of Three Hypostases, both being the offspring of a contentious spirit." in P. Schaff, H. Wace, eds. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Volume VII. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988).

[113]Kasper, p. 287.

[114]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 107.

this consciousness, belonging to the essence, is shared by each of the divine 'persons'.

However, for Rahner, this traditional axiom precludes the possibility of a distinctness of

subjectivities because in such a subjectivity, each divine person would have to have his own

consciousness in contradistinction to the others. Thus, there are 'persons' in the Trinity in

an ontological sense, but not in a psychological sense. This makes clear why the relation of

each divine 'person', in 'personal peculiarity and diversity', to each human being seems

incomplete in Rahner's theological presentation. When we eradicate the modern concept of

the word 'person', we have a 'real ontological relation' in all concreteness with each divine

'person', but its 'personal' peculiarity simply means its 'ontological' peculiarity; 'ontological'

here is not only a positive statement about that relation, but limits its meaning to exclude the

possibility of a 'personal' relationship in the modern sense. In this way, the term 'relation' is

also clarified (and, by implication, differentiated from 'relationship') and the promise of a

'relation' in 'personal peculiarity and diversity' to each of the divine persons becomes an

occasion to examine the wrongheadedness of what we may have thought was promised in

such a relation.

Rahner, however, does not abandon us to a 'pre-reflective tritheism'; he offers an

'explanatory concept':

> The one self-communication of the one God occurs in three different manners
> of given-ness, in which the one God is given concretely for us in himself, and
> not vicariously by other realities through their transcendental relation to God.
> God is the concrete God in each one of these manners of given-ness - which,
> of course, refer to each other relatively, without modalistically coinciding. If
> we translate this in terms of "immanent" Trinity, we may say: the one God

subsists in three distinct manners of subsisting.[115]

We must indicate here that 'distinct manners of subsisting' is not meant to replace the concept 'person', but to provide a 'logical explanation' of it. It is similar to Aquinas' explanation of the divine 'persons': "each of them subsists distinctly from the others in the divine nature"[116]. However, in Rahner, the purpose of this explanatory concept is to limit what might otherwise be understood by the concept 'person'. In the next chapter, we shall examine whether or not this explanatory concept, defined as it is in contradistinction from the modern concept 'person', is modalistic, but now let us consider its usefulness.

The basic presupposition of the need for such an 'explanatory concept' is this: the modern concept 'person' means something univocal which would necessitate three consciousnesses in God, but in the early Church 'person' meant something univocal which necessitates our rejection of the modern concept. This presupposition is circulatory and appears to be false. In the second century, 'persona' (as an equivalent for *prosopon*) carried with it the unavoidable smack of modalism. However, within the early tradition, its meaning developed. If one were to place on a continuum the meaning of 'person' in the second century and what Rahner considers its modern meaning, it would be undeniable that only as 'person' moved away from its "original" more univocal and denotative meaning (which was too commensurate with modalism) *toward* the "modern concept" did it become an accurate label for the theological description of the God whom Christians worshipped. In other words, there are three general "contexts" for the concept 'person': (1) its original context in

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[115]Rahner, <u>The Trinity.</u> p. 109.

[116]<u>Summa Theologiae.</u> I, q. 30, a. 4.

which, when used in trintarian discourse, it communicated a pre-reflective modalism; (2) its ecclesial context in which, when used in trinitarian discourse, it communicates the faith of the Church; (3) its modern context in which, when used in trinitarian discourse, it communicates a pre-reflective tritheism. The first and the third contexts mark the boundaries for the use of the concept in the second. If one uses 'person' in the sense of 'impersonate', in the sense of an actor's mask, then the distinction of the divine persons is abandoned for modalism. If one uses 'person' in the sense of autonomous, "ruggedly" individuated subjects who each have a separate power, a separate will, a separate consciousness and who, consequently, can only ever constitute a unity by *choosing* to do so (as an achievement of their plurality), then the unity of the Godhead is abandoned for tritheism. The question is whether or not Rahner has set up a bit of 'straw man' by suggesting that this latter, extreme individualism is what modern Christians mean when they use the term 'person'. His caution is warranted by the fact that Christians use this concept in trinitarian discourse simultaneous to its more extreme use in other contexts, but the fact remains that these are *different* contexts. The use of the term 'person' in the early Church was also contemporaneous with its use in other contexts (even heretical ones). The term has never had an univocal meaning which we might point to with a definitive explanatory concept. Just as Tertullian was able to make use of a term used by his opponents - unaccompanied by an explanatory concept - as a means of differentiating orthodoxy from modalism, we should be able to risk its use today. What is needed, maybe, is not so much an 'explanatory concept' (though we may be grateful for Rahner's contribution of one), but simply an explanation of its meaning.

Moreover, Rahner's pastoral purpose of demonstrating a real ontological relation between human beings and each divine person is not assisted by this explanatory concept:

> In a technical theological context Rahner's suggestion can certainly provide the service he claims for it. It is another question, however, whether it is also kerygmatically meaningful - and that, after all, is Rahner's primary concern. It must in fact be said that if the concept of person is open to misunderstanding, the concept of 'distinct manner of subsistence' is unintelligible. Even more than the concept of person it is part of a special code language of theology. Independently of its philosophical use and its 'technical' definition the term 'person' immediately conveys some sort of meaning to every human being, whereas 'distinct manner of subsistence' is an exclusively metalinguistic concept which as such is antecedently unsuited for use in preaching. Furthermore, it is not enough that the trinitarian confession should be marked by logical clarity; this confession is also to be fit for doxological use. But no one can invoke, adore and glorify a distinct manner of subsisting.[117]

Rahner's explanatory concept may help to clarify, theologically, the relation between human beings and each divine person, but its usefulness to the homiletic proclamation of this relation is less clear.

Finally, Rahner's 'explanatory concept' is a defense against tritheism: "whatever would mean three 'subjectivities' must be carefully kept away from the concept of person in the present context."[118] However, is it possible to speak of the divine persons as subjects or even of their 'subjectivity' without doing so tritheistically? It is clear to Rahner that we cannot. Despite this, it may be possible to use a more modern concept of person in trinitarian discourse while safeguarding the axiom of one consciousness in God:

> according to the traditional terminology, we must say that the one divine consciousness subsists in a triple mode. This means that a triple *principium* or subject of the one consciousness must be accepted and, at the same time, that the three subjects cannot be simply unconscious but are conscious of

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[117]Kasper, p. 288.

[118]Rahner, The Trinity. pp. 75-76.

themselves by means of the one consciousness (*principium quo*). This assertion follows, on the one hand, from the fact that the divine persons are really identical with the one being and consciousness and, on the other hand, from the fact that they proceed from spiritual acts of knowledge and love, so that between them there exists a spiritual relationship which by its very nature cannot but be conscious. We have no choice, then, but to say that in the Trinity we are dealing with three subjects who are reciprocally conscious of each other by reason of one and the same consciousness which the three subjects 'possess', each in his own proper way.[119]

If we can speak of three subjects in the one Godhead, then we can speak of a real

ontological relation between each divine person and each human being, not only

ontologically, but in real 'personal peculiarity': a relation*ship*.

To speak of three subjects in the one Godhead does not dissolve the absolute mystery

of God; the utter dissimilarity between ourselves and God remains, even in the moment

when we use analogy and language of similarity to express our faith:

> It is clear that personalist categories can be applied only analogically to the Trinity. This means that every similarity is accompanied by an even greater dissimilarity. Since in God not only the unity but also the differentiation and therefore the opposition is always greater than in human interpersonal relationships, the divine persons are not less dialogical but infinitely more dialogical than human persons are. The divine persons are not only in dialogue, they *are* dialogue. The Father is a pure self-enunciation and address to the Son as his Word; the Son is a pure hearing and heeding of the Father and therefore pure fulfillment of his mission; the Holy Spirit is pure reception, pure gift. These personal relations are reciprocal but they are not interchangeable. The Father alone speaks, the Son responds in obedience; the Father, through the Son and with the Son, is the giver, the Holy Spirit is pure recipient. In his answer, therefore, the Son is not thought of as also speaking; the Spirit is not thought of as also giving. It does not follow from this, however, that there is no reciprocal Thou. Responding in obedience and owing one's being to another are also forms of Thou-saying, but a Thou-saying that takes seriously the uniqueness both of one's own and of the other's person. In other words: in God and among the divine persons, and because of, not despite, their infinitely greater unity, there is also an infinitely greater inter-

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[119]Kasper, p. 189.

relationality and interpersonality than in human inter-personal relations.[120]

The character of the absolute mystery is not only evinced by its singularity in the confession

of the one God; it is central to the confession of three *persons* in one God.

Rahner's approach to the concept 'person' is the presupposition for his evaluation of

the psychological doctrine of the Trinity. The psychological doctrine of the Trinity identifies

a theological tradition within Latin Christianity which seeks to "bring home to the

intelligence of the faith an understanding of the threefold-distinct manner of subsisting of the

one God by means of psychological categories and according to the model of the spiritual

self-actuation of man"[121]. Such a tradition understands the image of God as a vestige of

the Trinity, as we see in books VIII to XV of St. Augustine's *De Trinitate*. It is not Rahner's

purpose to examine this doctrine in critical detail, but to offer several general remarks which

demonstrate that attempts to conceive the inner life of God in this way "ultimately... are not

really all that helpful"[122].

Rahner is convinced that the psychological doctrine of the Trinity is unavoidably

hypothetical and speculative in character:

> They have no evident model *from* human psychology *for* the doctrine of the
> Trinity (a model known already before the doctrine of the Trinity), to explain
> why divine knowledge, as absolute primordial self-presence, necessarily means
> the distinct manner of subsisting of that which is "uttered"... Rather it
> postulates *from* the Trinity a model of human knowledge and love, which
> either remains questionable, or about which it is not clear that it can be more

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[120]Kasper, pp. 289-290.

[121]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 115.

[122]Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith. p. 135.

than a *model* of human knowledge precisely as *finite.* And this model it applies again to God.[123]

Truly, one cannot find a clear explanation in the tradition of the psychological doctrine of the Trinity as to *why* the Father's knowing and loving proceed from him in a manner which, from eternity, mean that these are constituted as persons distinct from the Father. On the other hand, a doctrine of God which begins with the 'economic' Trinity and argues the *self-communication* of God in this *oikonomia*, and thus the 'immanent' Trinity, cannot explain the *reason* for the divine processions in Godself any better. For the Logos, Rahner offers us the passivity of an heir soon-to-be-apparent; for the Spirit, we have the character of absolute love (which is fairly close to a psychological analogy). These do not really amount to 'reasons' for the processions in the 'immanent' Trinity. Rahner's approach can only identify the 'reason' (for the processions) in the economy of salvation, but because these processions are processions in Godself (without which the economy cannot be a self-communication), they must have a 'reason' in the inner life of God.

To try to imagine "the inner life of God completely unrelated to us and to our Christian existence"[124] may not be 'kerygmatically correct', but Rahner has not sufficiently proven that such is the case in the psychological doctrine of the Trinity. A doctrine of God which begins with the 'immanent' Trinity cannot really say more than what we know from the economy of salvation, but it can reapproach the economy based on what it has taught us. The failure of a psychological doctrine of the Trinity to identify the reason for the processions in Godself does indicate that such a doctrine cannot exist by itself as a doctrine

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[123]Rahner, The Trinity. pp. 117-118.

[124]Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith. p. 135.

of God (whereas a strictly economic doctrine of God can), but must remember the 'economic' Trinity as well. In its original formulation, as we have already said, this is precisely the case. Only after an extensive theology of the 'economic' Trinity in books I to VII of his *De Trinitate* does St. Augustine then proceed to the presentation of his psychological doctrine of the 'immanent' Trinity. In fact, Augustine's trinitarian theology might be considered as an example of the first clause of Rahner's basic axiom, "the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity"; Augustine does not then reverse the order and go back to the economy as in Rahner's second clause (rather, he shows that a *vestigia Trinitatis* can be found in the human person, the image of God), but in no way can it be said that Augustine "neglects the experience of the Trinity in the economy of salvation"[125].

One suspects that Rahner's real objection to the psychological doctrine of the Trinity is its attempt to imagine the relations between the divine persons in a way bracketed from their relation to us. In such a case, his fears about the modern concept of 'person' might prove themselves correct. And yet, it is precisely in the development of Christian trinitarianism that the modern concept of 'person' has been made possible:

> it remains true that this speech-form is more than just a final decision to cling to some string of letters or other. The struggle over the language of the profession of faith involved settling the struggle over the thing itself, so that in this language, inadequate as it may be, contact with the reality does take place. We can say from the history of ideas that it was here that the reality "person" was first fully sighted; the concept and idea of "person" dawned on the human mind in no other way than in the struggle over the Christian image of God...[126]

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[125]Rahner, <u>Foundations of Christian Faith.</u> p. 135.

[126]Joseph Ratzinger, <u>Introduction to Christianity.</u> (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) p. 130.

Rahner's concern about the psychological doctrine of the Trinity is part of the concern he

has about the concept 'person'; in this way, Rahner sees an especial vulnerability to tritheism

in the Latin tradition (he does not say this, but the concept 'person' and the psychological

doctrine of the Trinity are certainly not the products of the Greek tradition). His fears may

be warranted, but they may also distort his own evaluation of both the concept 'person' and

the psychological doctrine of the Trinity. In the patristic period, the West was in far greater

danger of succumbing to modalism and Rahner's theology needs to discern which demon

tempts us today; are we "practically, mere monotheists" or does the danger of a "quite

massive tritheism... loom much larger than Sabellian modalism"[127].

Rahner is correct in suspecting that the western tradition identified by the

psychological doctrine of the Trinity fails to show the real ontological relation between God

and human beings without the help of a more soteriological approach to trinitarian theology.

In its original context (i.e. St. Augustine's *De Trinitate*) it was precisely a trinitarian

soteriology which constituted the presupposition for the psychological doctrine of the Trinity.

On the other hand, Rahner's presentation of trinitarian theology is not altogether successful

in showing the real ontological relation between human beings and God in the personal

peculiarity and diversity of each of the divine persons. A real ontological relation in

personal peculiarity and diversity suggests that what also needs to be demonstrated is a real

psychological relation between the Trinity and human beings. Psychologically, such a

relationship cannot only be marked by our human subjectivity and the subjectivity of single

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[127]Rahner, The Trinity. pp. 41-42.

divine subject subsisting in three distinct manners, or mediated by a human subjectivity in Christ. We must be able to "speak intelligibly of three distinct and conscious subjects of [one] divine consciousness... but to do so one must take the psychological analogy of the Trinitarian processions seriously"[128]. In its evangelical mission, the Church needs the soteriological approach *and* the psychological analogy, the Cappodocians and Augustine, the East and the West. We need one another to help us guard against the canonization of our oversights and errors. And if, upon discovery of the other, we become acutely aware of our *own* oversights and errors, we should not then forget our strengths and achievements and the manner in which God has kept faith with us.

In its anxiety about a "quite massive tritheism", Rahner's trinitarian theology is suspicious of the concept of 'person' and resists any possibility that three divine subjects might possess one divine consciousness. In order to avoid such a 'new' psychological doctrine of the Trinity, he rejects the possibility that the classic psychological doctrine might be really helpful. In this way, the real ontological relation by which Rahner hopes to show the absolute proximity of the trinitarian mystery to us is protected from what he feels would be a distortion. As a consequence, Rahner's trinitarian theology fails to show successfully this real ontological relation in personal peculiarity and diversity. To do so, successfully, requires that the real *psychological* relation be shown between the three divine subjects and each human being. These limitations of Rahner's trinitarian theology in no way compromise its real achievement. Rahner's theology of grace and of the Incarnation are proper to his trinitarian theology and are organized by the monarchy of the Father who communicates

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[128]Lonergan, p. 93.

himself to us through the Son in the Spirit. In the next chapter we shall consider the charge

of Jürgen Moltmann that Rahner's trinitarian theology is modalist and consider further the

role this charge plays in Moltmann's attempt to 'answer' the questions raised by feminism,

satisfaction theory and liberationism with a 'new' approach to trinitarian theology.

Chapter Four: Is Rahner's Trinitarian Theology Modalist?

Section One: Moltmann's Allegation that Rahner's Trinitarian Theology is Modalist

From the outset, we must understand that Jürgen Moltmann's allegation of "Rahner's

Idealistic modalism"[129] is not only meant to be a critical summary of Rahner's position;

this allegation, this label, also serves a larger rhetorical and methodological purpose in

Moltmann's own theological enterprise. Our immediate concern, however, is the content of

this allegation. Moltmann first uses the term "Sabellian modalism", but "to be more precise"

labels Rahner's position as a kind of "Idealistic modalism"[130]. We will first examine the

substance of this allegation and then, briefly, consider its rhetorical and methodological

function in Moltmann's understanding of the Trinity.

In the anthropocentric turn of the enlightenment, Moltmann recognizes a transition

from the understanding of God as "absolute substance" (supposedly the classical and

medieval view) to an understanding of God as "absolute subject":

> The more, therefore, man experiences himself as subject - even if finite subject
> - over against the world of objects he has subjected, the more he recognizes in
> God, not the supreme substance of the world, but the infinite, perfect and
> absolute subject, namely the archetype of himself.[131]

The modern 'bourgeois' concept of personality and subject seems to necessitate that "the

subjectivity of acting and receiving is transferred from the three divine Persons to the one

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[129]Moltmann, _The Trinity and the Kingdom._ p. 148.

[130]_ibid._ p. 144.

[131]_ibid._ p. 15.

divine subject"[132]. Moltmann does not demonstrate that, in fact, subjectivity and 'acting'

were predicated of the three divine persons before the modern period, but he does conceive

that in the modern context "the three persons are bound to be degraded to modes of being,

or modes of subsistence"[133]. For Moltmann, this 'idealistic modalism' "is a late triumph for

the Sabellian modalism which the early church rejected"[134].

Thus, the central presupposition which Moltmann brings to Rahner's trinitarian

theology is that the idea of one subjectivity in God must be equal to a Hegelian notion of

God as 'absolute subject' and that such a notion is inevitably modalistic. He must then begin

by demonstrating that Rahner rejects the possibility that the three divine persons are three

subjects. We have already seen that this is the way in which Rahner maintains the one

consciousness of God; Lonergan and Kasper are able to do this while allowing for the

possibility of three subjects, but Rahner's suspicion of the concept 'person' precludes this

possibility. Moltmann challenges this suspicion of Rahner:

> What Rahner calls 'our secular use of the word person' has nothing in
> common with modern thinking about the concept of person. What he
> describes is actually extreme individualism: everyone is a self-possessing, self-
> disposing centre of action which sets itself apart from other persons. But the
> philosophical personalism of Hölderlin, Feuerbach, Buber, Ebner, Rosenstock
> and others was designed precisely to overcome this possessive individualism:
> the 'I' can only be understood in the light of the 'Thou' - that is to say, it is a
> concept of relation.[135]

Moltmann is accurately able to differentiate an example of a modern concept of 'person'

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[132] ibid. p. 139.

[133] ibid.

[134] ibid.

[135] ibid. p. 145.

from what Rahner fears. One cannot help but notice Moltmann's rhetorical provocativeness

when he tries to locate Rahner's exaggerated notion of 'person' in the *Spiritual Exercises*:

'anima mea in manibus mea semper'[136]. This implies not only a critique, but a kind of

psychoanalysis of Rahner's position. Even though Moltmann insists that theology must

"think in the coming ecumenical fellowship"[137], there is a kind of controversial style in the

way he is able to bring forward the insinuation of jesuitry.

If Rahner's fears about the concept 'person' are invalid, one may think it sufficient to

say that his explanatory concept, 'distinct manners of subsisting'[138], is unnecessary.

Moltmann, however, wishes to demonstrate that it is modalistic. He insists that Rahner

wrongly ascribes a similar concept of person to Aquinas and that, in fact, the concept to

which Rahner alludes is only to be found in what Moltmann curiously calls "the neo-

scholasticism of Lonergan"[139]. He also insists that Rahner's rejection of "any mutual

'Thou'"[140] between the divine persons is also from Lonergan. Moltmann sees as the

consequence of such a position an uncertain identity for the divine persons:

it becomes clear that Rahner transforms the classical doctrine of the Trinity

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[136]ibid.

[137]ibid. xiv.

[138]In the English translation of Moltmann's text, Rahner's explanatory concept is translated as 'modes of subsistence'. Every other critique of Rahner which this writer has investigated uses the English translation of Rahner's own text in their analysis of this explanatory concept. It is, however, rhetorically effective (and in this case, it is the rhetoric of translation) to use 'modes'.

[139]ibid. p. 146.

[140]ibid.

> into the reflection trinity of the absolute subject; and the way he does this is plain too. The 'self-communication' of the Absolute has that differentiated structure which seems so similar to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. But in fact it makes the doctrine of the Trinity superfluous. The fact that God gives us himself in absolute self-communication *can* be associated with Father, Son and Spirit but it does not have to be. On the other hand what is stated biblically with the history of the Father, the Son and the Spirit is only vaguely paraphrased by the concept of God's self-communication.[141]

It is thus the unity of God's self-communication in Rahner's theology which, for Moltmann, makes the Trinity superfluous. One can describe this self-communication in trinitarian terms, but one does not have to. The concept of God's self-communication, for Moltmann, is unsuitable as a summary of the economy of salvation. It is unclear what might be a suitable concept and one must admit that Rahner never means to subsume "what is stated biblically with the history of the Father, the Son and the Spirit" under the use of one concept.

Moltmann claims that Rahner reduces salvation history to the Father's self-communication and that "the history of the Son is no longer identifiable at all"[142]; for Moltmann, this amounts to saying that "God's essence is his own self-communication"[143] which then threatens not only the distinction between the divine persons, but the distinction between God and the world:

> In the Holy Spirit who is experienced in the 'innermost centre of existence of an individual person', people rise into the inexhaustible mystery of God himself.
> This can no doubt be viewed as the mystical variant of the Idealistic

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[141]ibid. p. 147.

[142]ibid.

[143]ibid. p. 148.

doctrine of the 'trinitarian' reflection structure of the absolute subject.[144] Moltmann has thus arrived, in his analysis of Rahner, to where he has said the idea of one subject in God would lead: one subject, thus one absolute subject (which he identifies in Rahner's theology with God the Father), thus not a Trinity but a 'trinitarian' reflection structure of the absolute subject, thus Idealistic modalism.

We need to say a word about this 'trinitarian' reflection structure of the absolute subject which Moltmann so readily identifies in Rahner. Moltmann makes a connection between an Idealist absolute subject and, for God to be this absolute subject, an intellectually necessary "triadic process of reflection... through self-distinction and self-recollection"[145]. Because this self-distinction and self-recollection (and one suspects self-communication) belong to God*self*, they preclude the possibility of three subjects. Moltmann concludes from this that a *self*-distinction in God cannot really be a distinction at all, at least not a distinction which is authentically trinitarian.

Thus, Moltmann's accusation against Rahner follows a certain logic: (1) if God is one subject (2) God must be an Idealist absolute subject (3) in which the three divine persons are not really distinct, but only a reflection structure and (4) this is modalism which is demonstrated by Rahner's explanatory concept 'distinct manners of subsisting'. This allegation of modalism in any theology which refuses to speak of three subjects in God serves a larger rhetorical purpose which we will now very briefly explain.

Rahner insists on one subject in God and on the Father's monarchy as means of

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[144]*ibid.*

[145]*ibid.* p. 142.

guaranteeing the divine unity. For Moltmann "it is inescapably obvious that, for the sake of

the identity of the self-communicating divine subject, Rahner has to surrender the

interpersonal relations of the triune God"[146]. What Moltmann seeks to make most salient

in his presentation of the Trinity is precisely these interpersonal relations; he identifies the

divine unity, above all, in the *perichoresis* of the three divine persons. He makes a distinction

in the 'immanent' Trinity between its 'constitution' and its 'life', but acknowledges that these

are "two sides of the same thing"[147]. In the constitution of the Trinity, Moltmann keeps

the monarchy of the Father (it is the basis for his rejection of the *filioque*) who "forms the

'monarchial' unity of the Trinity"[148]. However, he distinguishes this 'monarchial' unity

from the unity of the *perichoresis*: "in respect of the Trinity's inner life, the three Persons

themselves form their unity, by virtue of their relation to one another and in the eternal

perichoresis of their love"[149]. This distinction between a 'monarchial' unity and a

'perichoretic' unity may be two sides of the same thing, but Moltmann shows a distinct

preference for one side; the 'perichoretic' unity is the properly understood unity of the

Trinity:

> By introducing the Aristotelian concept of cause or origin (*arche, aitia*) into the
> doctrine of the Trinity, as the Cappadocians did (and this was not undisputed
> in the early church either), the uniqueness of the Father over against the Son
> and the Holy Spirit can certainly be emphasized. But if the Father is only
> named as the 'origin' of the divinity of the Son and the divinity of the Holy
> Spirit, then the specific difference between the generation of the Son and the

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[146]*ibid.* p. 156.

[147]*ibid.* p. 173.

[148]*ibid.* p. 177.

[149]*ibid.*

> procession of the Spirit is blurred... It would therefore be helpful to remove the concept of the First Cause from trinitarian doctrine altogether, and to confine oneself to an account of the interpersonal relationships.[150]

Trinitarian theology, then, should not place its focus on the 'monarchial' unity, but should concern itself with the 'perichoretic' unity because *this* unity is "the eschatological question about the consummation of the trinitarian history of God"[151]. The unity of the 'economic' Trinity is accomplished historically in salvation history, in the fellowship of the *perichoresis*:

> The economic Trinity completes and perfects itself to immanent Trinity when the history and experience of salvation are completed and perfected. When everything is 'in God' and 'God is all in all', then the economic Trinity is raised into and transcended in the immanent Trinity. What remains is the eternal praise of the triune God in his glory.[152]

Thus, the "inner-trinitarian 'monarchy of the Father' only defines the inner-trinitarian constitution of God, not the world monarchy of a universal Father"[153]. The 'monarchy' of the Father may constitute the unity of the Trinity, but this unity is 'perfected' in the *perichoretic* fellowship which, in turn, is further 'perfected' in the parousia.

In a classical theology, none of this would be possible; the immutability of God insists that salvation history is 'for us' and not a process necessary for the 'perfection' of God. However, the axiom of immutability presents no difficulty for Moltmann. The central feature of his christology is the "reacceptance of the teachings of theopaschitism and

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[150]*ibid.* p. 189.

[151]*ibid.* p. 149.

[152]*ibid.* p. 161.

[153]*ibid.* p. 165.

patripassianism"[154]. God not only has a history with us, but our history *is* God's history

and the history of freedom *is* God's freedom:

> The situation of the crucified God makes it clear that human situations where
> there is no freedom are vicious circles which must be broken through because
> they can be broken through in him. Those who take the way from freedom of
> faith to liberating action automatically find themselves co-operating with other
> freedom movements in God's history.[155]

In turn, monotheism separates us from this history of God and, if one accepts Moltmann's

opposition of monotheism and trinitarianism, only faith in the Trinity rightly understands

both history and God.

Moltmann's bracketing of the 'monarchy' of the Father from this history is important

for several reasons. It removes our obligation to worship the Father as sovereign Lord so

that we may, instead, be his friends.[156] A 'monotheistic' understanding of the fatherhood

of God only serves to dehumanize women and men and especially women since "it is a

Christian form of the religion of patriarchal domination"[157]. Here we see Moltmann

taking seriously the "feminist protest against patriarchy in heaven and on earth [which] must

also involve males in turning from domination to community"[158]. God the Father, too,

must turn from 'domination' to 'community'.

The 'monarchy' is also an obstacle to Moltmann's understanding of "the unending

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[154]Moltmann, "The Motherly Father: Is Trinitarian Patripassianism Replacing Theological Patriarchalism?", p. 54.

[155]Moltmann, The Crucified God. pp. 317-318.

[156]Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom. p. 221.

[157]Moltmann, "The History of the Trinity" in History and the Triune God. (New York: Crossroad, 1992) p. 4.

[158]Moltmann, "The History of the Trinity", p. 1.

pain of the Father"[159]. Moltmann considers the traditional teaching on God's immutability

and impassivity incompatible with "the revelation of God in the crucified Jesus"[160]. His

theology of the Trinity's unity (where the constituting unity is perfected in the *perichoresis*) is

consistent with his position. It is one way of understanding the role of the Father in the

death of the Son. In fact, Moltmann uses the Reformation idea of *satispassio* (i.e. that the

Father accepts Christ's sacrifice because he has 'suffered enough' - as opposed to Anselm's

or Thomas' 'doing enough') as the basis of our salvation and includes the Father in this

suffering. We are not saved because Christ suffered enough to placate the Father, but

because the Father and the Son both suffered enough.

Finally, a non-monarchial, perichoretic unity guarantees an appropriate 'social'

doctrine of the Trinity:

> It is only when the doctrine of the Trinity [in its perichoretic unity] vanquishes
> the monotheistic notion of the great universal monarch in heaven, and his
> divine patriarchs in the world, that earthly rulers, dictators and tyrants cease to
> find any justifying religious archetypes any more.[161]

Now one may doubt that dictators and tyrants need religious archetypes to be dictators and

tyrants, but Moltmann's point is that the Trinity (as *opposed* to monotheism) provides us

with a social programme, a model for political theology. This is based on Erik Peterson's

understanding of monotheism as a political problem; Moltmann blames this monotheism not

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[159]Moltmann, "The Motherly Father", p. 53.

[160]Moltmann, History and the Triune God. p. xvi.

[161]Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom. p. 197.

only for patriarchy in social history, but for the hierarchical nature of the Church.[162] The

thirst for justice in the Jewish prophetic tradition is ignored and a divine plurality is our only

hope. One wonders how India and Hinduism (with certainly no worries about monotheism

imposing oppressive religious archetypes on its people) could have managed to develop a

society at least as 'patriarchal' and 'hierarchical' (and possibly more so) as that of the West.

Still, for Moltmann (as for Boff) the Trinity is a perichoretic community whose unity is a

social achievement of divine subjects:

> If the history of the kingdom is this history of God which is open and inviting
> in a trinitarian sense, how can we talk about *God's unity*? If the three divine
> subjects are co-active in this history, as we have shown they are, then the unity
> of the Trinity cannot be a monadic unity. The unity of the divine tri-unity lies
> in the *union* of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, not in their numerical unity.
> It lies in their *fellowship*, no in the identity of a single subject.[163]

This 'union' of the divine persons means that "personalism and socialism cease to be

antitheses and are seen to be derived from a common foundation [i.e. the union of the

divine fellowship]. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity compels us to develop social

personalism or personal socialism."[164] One is uncertain whether Christian and trinitarian

faith 'compels us' to any kind of social*ism*, but it is clear that, for Moltmann, the two belong

together. No wonder that for Moltmann the monarchy of the Father cannot be really

meaningful in the *perichoresis*; at most his monarchy is that of a founder or a shop-steward in

the fellowship of this trinitarian union.

Thus, Moltmann's allegation that Rahner's trinitarian theology is modalist has an

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[162]*ibid.* p. 202.

[163]*ibid.* p. 95.

[164]*ibid.* p. 199.

important rhetorical and methodological function in his efforts to differentiate between the

constitutive unity of the Trinity established by the monarchy of the Father and the perfected

or eschatological unity of the Trinity achieved in the *perichoresis*. We will now proceed to an

evaluation of his allegation that Rahner's trinitarian theology is modalist.

Section Two: An Evaluation of Moltmann's Critique

We have seen that Moltmann's allegation of modalism in Rahner's trinitarian

theology is rooted in the different positions each has on whether the divine persons may be

considered as 'subjects'. Rahner himself would readily admit that his position is that there is

one subject in God because there is one consciousness in God. Moltmann does not say so

explicitly but seems to reject the insistence on the one consciousness[165] and, thus, to

embrace three subjects in God. Moltmann's position appears to be different from that of

Lonergan and Kasper who disagree with Rahner on the three subjects, but who do so while

maintaining the traditional teaching of the one consciousness.

Undoubtedly, then, Moltmann is correct that Rahner does not hold for three subjects

in God. Moltmann himself, as we have seen, identifies two possible sources for the idea of

one subject. One possible source is the 'absolute subject' of Idealism which, according to

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[165]Moltmann, <u>The Trinity and the Kingdom.</u> p. 141; 145.
Moltmann shows an aversion to Barth's and Rahner's defense of the
the one consciousness. Each refers to F. Diekamp, <u>Katholische</u>
<u>Dogmatik</u>, I, (Münster, 1957) and Moltmann seems to attribute the
unity of consciousness to Diekamp when, in fact, it is implied in
Augustine, Thomas and as part of the traditional doctrine of God.
cf. Kasper, pp. 287-289.

Moltmann, 'degrades' the divine persons "to modes of being, or modes of subsistence"[166];

another possible source is the traditional thesis on the one consciousness as articulated in

neo-scholasticism. Because Moltmann presumes that the former is the source of Rahner's

position on the matter, he can immediately conclude that Rahner advocates not only one

subject, but a kind of Hegelian 'absolute subject'. In my judgment, Moltmann is incorrect.

It is Rahner's desire to secure the traditional meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity against

the possibility of tritheism which is the source of his position on the one subject. Kasper

notes this:

> It is impossible to accept three consciousnesses in God. But given this
> presupposition, which strictly speaking is self-evident in the context of the
> church's doctrine of the Trinity, Rahner too quickly concludes: therefore no
> three centers of consciousness and action. In thus rejecting the modern
> concept of person, Rahner is entirely dependent on Neo-scholasticism.[167]

Rahner's insistence on the one subject derives from neo-scholasticism (whereas Lonergan

was able to use the original scholasticism more creatively[168]), but his concern about the

modern concept of 'person' is that it may lead to tritheism. Moltmann's failure to clarify his

stance on the one consciousness serves to illustrate that Rahner's concerns are not entirely

unfounded.

Thus, Moltmann's transition from Rahner's insistence on the one subject to a

presentation of that subject as the 'absolute subject' is weak. Rahner, himself, never speaks

of God as the absolute subject; he *does* speak of God's absolute self-communication which

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[166]ibid. p. 139.

[167]Kasper, p. 289.

[168]ibid.

brings God into proximity with us in salvation history, in the Incarnation and grace. Such terminology may even have Idealistic overtones, but the idea of absolute subject does not actually appear in Rahner.

If God, in Rahner's theology, is in no way reduced to a concept like 'absolute subject' it is unlikely that Moltmann is correct about Rahner's treatment of the distinctiveness of the divine persons. In Rahner's theology, the divine persons may not possess three consciousnesses and may not even be three subjects possessing one consciousness, but neither are they merely a 'trinitarian' reflection structure:

> We should not overlook the following logical connections: if the Trinity is necessary as 'immanent', if God is absolutely 'simple', and in fact freely communicates himself as 'economic' Trinity, which *is* the 'immanent' Trinity, then the 'immanent' Trinity is the necessary condition of the possibility of God's free self-communication.[169]

Thus, Moltmann's charge that Rahner reduces the 'immanent' Trinity to the 'economic' Trinity is unfounded. If God is self-communicating in his essence (Moltmann's terms, not Rahner's), it is not because the Trinity is only 'economic', but because the 'economic' Trinity is *who* the 'immanent' Trinity is. However the 'immanent' self-communication - the generation of the Son, the procession of the Spirit - is the presupposition for the 'economic' self-communication. Thus, in Rahner's theology, what is communicated to human beings is not merely a 'trinitarian' reflection structure of the one absolute subject, as Moltmann maintains, but the proximity of the absolute mystery. Moltmann caricatures Rahner's theology of mystery as one where "human beings rise into the inexhaustible mystery of God himself", but in Rahner's presentation, it is the incomprehensible mystery which draws near

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[169]Rahner, The Trinity. p. 102. n. 21.

to us. God, in Rahner's theology, is not so much absolute subject as absolute *mystery* and the absolute proximity of this mystery is the beatific vision of the three divine persons which does not cease to be mystery, but abides in love. Moltmann has, perhaps unwittingly, misrepresented Rahner's theology in order to fit it into a box which he has foreordained as "Idealistic modalism". Rahner's approach may be limited by how seriously he takes the "anthropcentric turn" (which is the basis for his concern about the concept 'person', though not for his opposition to three subjects), but his position constitutes neither Idealism nor modalism and to characterize it as such is unfair. However, such an approach has a certain rhetorical effectiveness, especially if Moltmann's readers have not read Rahner.

Thus, Moltmann is incorrect to say that Rahner is a modalist. It may be true that Rahner is overconcerned with the problem of the modern concept of 'person', and that his explanatory concept is not really that helpful or necessary; however Moltmann indicates that 'distinct manners of subsisting' is modalistic. He tries to show that Rahner incorrectly ascribes a similar concept of person to Aquinas and argues that Rahner, in fact, finds this concept in Lonergan. Here again we see Moltmann trying to locate the sources of Rahner's ideas, but here again he is wrong.[170] In the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas' initial definition of person in I, q.29, a.1 is indeed that of Boethius ("an individual substance of a rational nature"). However, the clarification of person to be found in q.30, a.4 ("each of them subsists distinctly from the others in the divine nature") is the source for what Rahner

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[170]Moltmann not only blames Lonergan for Rahner's 'distinct manners of subsisting', but for the absence of any mutual love in the 'immanent' Trinity. This is puzzling since Lonergan not only accepts the idea of three subjects, but also of a real mutual love in the 'immanent' Trinity (cf. "Chistology Today: Methodological Reflections" pp. 93-94).

develops as his explanatory concept. Even if a similar idea appears in Thomas, such

evidence may not be sufficient, in Moltmann's estimation, to exonerate Rahner's explanatory

concept from the charge of modalism. However,

Aquinas is not the first author in which we see the use of this sort of terminology.

In St. Gregory of Nyssa - for whom the immediate threat of modalism was removed

by geography - we see a comprehensive defense of the unity of the Godhead. Rahner's

insistence on God's 'incomprehensibility' and on the threat of tritheism are readily apparent

in Gregory. Gregory also defends the monarchy of the Father, and we can see in his

terminology the basis for Rahner's explanatory concept:

> For when we say that one is "caused," and that the other is "without cause," we
> do not divide the nature by the word "cause", but only indicate the fact that the
> Son does not exist without generation, nor the Father by generation: but we
> must in the first place believe that something exists, and then scrutinize the
> manner of existence of the object of our belief: thus the question of existence
> is one, and that of *the mode of existence* is another. To say that anything exists
> without generation sets forth the mode of its existence, but what exists is not
> indicated by this phrase.[171]

Thus, Rahner's explanatory concept of 'person' uses the Tradition itself to recover its

traditional meaning. Now, one may concur with Kasper that this explanatory concept has

little pastoral usefulness, but such an opinion is in no way a charge of heresy. Moreover,

Moltmann's notion that the interpersonal relations of the Trinity are perfected historically

implies that the unity of the Godhead has a kind of imperfection in the economy of

salvation. This is not only opposed to Rahner's presentation of the unity of God's self-

communication, it is a contradiction of the Fathers:

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[171]St. Gregory of Nyssa, <u>On "Not Three Gods".</u> in <u>Nicene and
Post-Nicene Fathers. Series II, Volume V.</u> (Edinburgh: T&T Clark,
1988) p. 339.

If, then, every good thing and every good name, depending on that power and purpose which is without beginning, is brought to perfection in the power of the Spirit through the Only-begotten God, without mark of time or distinction (since there is no delay, existent or conceived, in the motion of the Divine will from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit) and if Godhead also is one of the good names and concepts, it would not be proper to divide the name into a plurality, since the unity existing in the action prevents plural enumeration. And as the Saviour of all men, specially of them that believe, is spoken of by the Apostle as one, and no one from this phrase argues either that the Son does not save them who believe, or that salvation is given to those who receive it without the intervention of the Spirit; but God who is over all, is the Saviour of all, while the Son works salvation by means of the grace of the Spirit, and yet they are not on this account called in Scripture three Saviours...[172]

This 'unity existing in the action' corresponds to the inner unity between the two modalities

of God's self-communication. The Father's saving will, in Gregory and Rahner, is the origin

of that self-communication.

When we examine the substance of Moltmann's allegation and deal fairly - not

eisegetically - with Rahner's trinitarian theology, it is clear that Rahner is in no way a

modalist. He *does* belong to that tendency in the Tradition (as does Gregory of Nyssa) to

emphasize the unity of the Godhead. Orthodox Christianity, however, does not 'subsist' in a

defense against tritheism anymore than it 'subsists' in a defense against modalism. In this

sense, Rahner's position is not a trinitarian *summa*, but in no way does he intend it to be.

For Rahner, "the quicker individual contributions are absorbed into a general understanding

of the mystery which has contemporary relevance and pastoral vitality, the happier the

theologian should be"[173]; this is a fundamentally ecclesial understanding of a theologian's

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[172]St. Gregory of Nyssa, p. 335.

[173]Rahner, "The Mystery of the Trinity" in Theological Investigations. Vol. XVI. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) pp. 255-256.

vocation. The least the readers of such a theologian can do is to read his theology with ecclesial understanding.

Thus, we may admit that Rahner brings what is possibly an overstated fear of tritheism to his trinitarian theology. This results in an emphasis on the unity of the Godhead which, combined with his concerns about the concept 'person', leaves a fulsome treatment of the distinction between the divine persons somewhat wanting. It is not, however, as if the distinctions are not there. Rahner makes them in a theologically correct manner, but his explanatory concept 'distinct manners of subsisting' - despite its orthodoxy - does not help to show the relation between each human being and each divine person in its personal peculiarity. His trinitarian theology does succeed in demonstrating the real ontological relation between us and the Trinity and his real achievement here is secure. Moreover, Rahner's emphasis on the identity of the 'economic' and 'immanent' Trinity serves to highlight the pastoral purpose of our doctrine of God, that the Trinity of our theology is the God of the salvation of the world.

Chapter Five: **The Unity of the Trinity**

Karl Rahner's trinitarian theology is not modalistic. Modalism is a way - historically,

a first attempt - of overcoming an adoptionist christology and recognizing the full divinity of

Christ by arguing that whatever may *appear* to be a distinction between the Father and the

Son is not a distinction in God *per se.* Third century Christians, like Tertullian, knew that

such a description was not the faith they had received from the apostles. Tertullian used

personae to refer to what the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are, in distinction from one

another. Given the long tradition of such a concept, it is understandable that a challenge to

its suitability in trinitarian discourse would be viewed as a reversion to the modalism which

the concept overcame. Karl Rahner's serious concerns about the concept 'person' do

represent a challenge to its suitability in trinitarian discourse, but the content of his theology

precludes Moltmann's contention that this theology is "a late triumph... for Sabellian

modalism"[174]. However, Rahner's genuine concern about the threat of tritheism does

result in a certain proximity to modalism in his trinitarian theology. We may briefly consider

how this is problematic, but also how it might prove helpful to the theology of our own day

as we creatively work toward an understanding of the Trinity as a community.

If Rahner is incorrect about the modern concept 'person' and if it is possible to speak

of three subjects in God (not so much in the manner of Moltmann, but following Lonergan

and Kasper), then 'person' may be the very traditional concept of which we are most in need

in contemporary trinitarian discourse. The effect of the term 'person' on our modern

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[174]Moltmann, <u>The Trinity and the Kingdom.</u> p. 139.

sensibility helps us to grasp immediately that the Son is in no way a mere instrument for the Father's self-communication. 'Person' helps us to imagine, religiously, that the Holy Spirit is really equal to and distinct from the Father and the Son. 'Person' helps us to understand the "concrete God" of the Old Testament as the Father of Jesus Christ without subordinating to him the two "modalities" of his self-communication. The personhood of the Father eliminates the threat of subordinationism from his 'monarchy' since the 'persons' of whom he is the source share his status as 'persons'. Finally, 'person' is an appropriate term for our understanding of the *perichoresis*; one cannot speak of the mutual indwelling of one distinct manner of subsisting in another distinct manner of subsisting and expect to be understood. Despite his concern about the modern concept 'person', this concept helps to highlight and secure much of the real achievement of Rahner's trinitarian theology.

Rahner's fears about a 'quite massive tritheism', however, are not altogether unfounded. If they seem to be overstated for the time in which he wrote, they are less so today. There is a real desire among many contemporary theologians, of otherwise quite different theological orientations, to speak of the Trinity as a community. This is most evident in theologians who are attempting to deepen their understanding of the relationship between the Trinity and history. This attempt at a deeper understanding of the relationship between history and God is especially apparent in liberation theology and in feminist theology. This is also true among theologians whose orientation is more that of 'process theology'. Moltmann's trinitarian theology represents an attempt to integrate these varied and creative approaches.

In order to more clearly articulate the idea of the Trinity as a community, Moltmann

emphasizes the perichoretical unity of the divine 'fellowship'. His emphasis on the *perichoresis* does help to underscore the mutuality and community in the love shared by the Father, Son and Spirit, but it does so at the expense of what he calls the 'constitution' of the Trinity. This seems to 'divide' the unity of the Godhead between a constitutive 'monarchial' unity (which, as a *fait accompli*, is no longer the proper focus of trinitarian theology) and a living 'perichoretic' unity which, for Moltmann, is the 'real' unity of the Trinity. This approach underscores the danger in speaking of the Trinity as a community. When we understand the unity of the Godhead as the unity of a community we should not see this unity as a kind of moral achievement of the three divine persons. The three divine persons are not one God because they love each other as if they overcame a disunity to achieve a unity; they are one God because the Father is the unoriginate source of the Son and the Spirit whose *own nature* is communicated to them in their respective generation and spiration. This distinction - between the Father as origin and the *perichoresis* - is only meaningful for us in the order of intelligibility. Because of the *perichoresis*, we may speak of a community of divine persons, but we should never oppose this 'community' with the Father's 'monarchy'. The Father's personal relations to the Son and the Spirit are not different from his begetting and spirating; to separate the 'monarchy' from the *perichoresis* is to effectively remove the Father - as Father - from the divine community.

Now this is more an implication than an intention in Moltmann's theology; but since the implication is equivalent to tritheism, one would not be ridiculous in identifying a proximity to tritheism in Moltmann's whole approach to the unity of God. I think we need to consider Rahner's "proximity to modalism" in light of such a "proximity to tritheism".

Rahner's concern with the "threat of tritheism" is probably overstated given the original context of his theology, but what was originally a weakness in Rahner's approach is a real benefit for us today. As we try to be more creative in our approach to trinitarian theology, it is also necessary to be more careful. Rahner's trinitarian theology, in the context of modern theology generally, has an important function in helping us to balance our reflections on the Trinity. We might conclude with a consideration of how a principle achievement of Rahner's trinitarian theology, the Father's identity as unoriginate origin, is a particular help both in resisting tritheism and in speaking of the Trinity as a community.

The great achievement of Karl Rahner's trinitarian theology is the presentation of a doctrine of God closely related to salvation history. Rahner's theology of the Incarnation and grace are brought into a trinitarian unity by his understanding of God the Father as absolute unoriginate; this is the Father as the one origin of the Son and the Spirit, which is his *monarchia*. The unity which derives from the Father's identity as origin of the Godhead cannot be separated from the mutual indwelling of the divine persons, the *perichoresis*.

The unity of the *perichoresis* is only possible because of the Father's identity as unoriginate origin. This identity does not remove the Father from the 'fellowship' of the divine community, but establishes this 'fellowship'. In turn, this 'fellowship' is not 'governed' by the Father because he is its source, but his "fontality is the origin of the other fontality"[175] of the Son and of the fontality of the Spirit as well. To think that the Father somehow withholds for himself something extra of the divine nature so as to be able to

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[175]St. Bonaventure, <u>Disputed Questions on the Trinity.</u> Q. VIII. in Z. Hayes, ed. <u>The Disputed Questions.</u> (St. Bonaventure, NY: Francisican Institute, 1979) p. 263.

'preside' over the Trinity is basically subordinationist. The Father is uniquely unoriginate

origin, but this is not to say his identity is static:

> Supreme primacy in the supreme and highest principle demands the highest
> actuality, the highest fontality, and the highest fecundity. For the first
> principle, by virtue of the fact that it is first, is the most perfect in producing,
> the most fontal in emanating, and the most fecund in germinating. Therefore
> since the perfect production, emanation and germination is realized only
> through two intrinsic modes, namely, by way of nature and by way of will, that
> is, by way of the word and of love, therefore the highest perfection, fontality,
> and fecundity necessarily demands two kinds of emanation with respect to the
> two hypostases which are produced and emanate from the first person as from
> the first producing principle. Therefore, it is necessary to affirm three persons.
> And since the most perfect production is not realized except with respect to
> coeternals, and the most fecund germination is not realized except with respect
> to consubstantial beings, it is necessary to admit the first principle includes
> within itself three hypostases that are coequal, coeternal, and
> consubstantial.[176]

St. Bonaventure's comments here help to illustrate Rahner's own understanding of the

Father in relation to the Son and the Spirit. Rahner does not use the term 'monarchy'

precisely because the monarchy cannot be for itself. The Father's identity as unoriginate

origin is an active and dynamic relation to the coequal, coeternal and consubstantial

hypostases of whom he is the origin. It makes no sense to defend the unity of the

perichoresis 'against' the unity of which the Father is principle as unoriginate origin; they are

one and the same unity. In turn, we may not "hold the monarchy" 'against' the *perichoresis*.

The 'monarchy' explains how the *perichoresis* is possible; the *perichoresis* tells us what the

'monarchy' is for.

Because of Moltmann's proximity to tritheism - and the widespread theological desire

to speak of the Trinity as a community - we need Rahner's emphasis on the unity of God.

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[176]*ibid.*

The unity of the treatise *De Deo Uno*, conceived in terms of the one *ousia*, is not that helpful in checking the problem of near-tritheism because community and *ousia* have little logical correlation. It is precisely Rahner's insistence on the Father as principle of the Trinity's unity that we need to maintain if we are to speak meaningfully of the unity of a divine community. To call the Trinity a 'community' without simultaneously maintaining the identity of the Father as unoriginate origin inevitably results in a kind of moral "union" which does not sufficiently safeguard the one *ousia* of the Godhead.

Let us use a metaphor to illustrate this point.

Like the unity of a community, the unity of parents with one another is <u>constituted by</u> love; this unity is an achievement of two distinct persons coming together. However, the unity between parent and child <u>constitutes</u> love (or at least it should; where it doesn't, this is not the moral failure of the child but of the parent. The moral obligation, the expectation of loving in unity, belongs to the parent). In other words, there is a difference between love which is mutually reciprocated and the unity which it creates and love which is not yet reciprocated. Appropriate unreciprocated love (as opposed to that of the courtier) is only possible when a 'unity' already exists, when the one who loves knows a unity between herself and the one who is loved. This love and this unity do not depend on reciprocation. This unity, and that love which it constitutes, would remain even if reciprocation were never forthcoming. For example, if a parent loves a child and the child has not yet loved the parent, there is still a unity between the two. On the other hand, if a man loves a woman and the woman has not yet loved the man, there is no unity. The unity of the divine persons is like the second type because the persons of the Trinity *do* reciprocate love, but the unity

of the Godhead does not *depend* on this reciprocation because there is love before reciprocation in the principium or 'monarchy' of the Father. That is why the first person of the Trinity is called (and should be called) 'Father' and why 'Lover' would not be an appropriate alternative. The only appropriate alternative from human speech would be 'Mother'. To speak of the 'monarchy' of the first person is simply to say that the Son is begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father. The *perichoresis* of the divine persons is a description of those relations between the divine persons which have their origin in the Father. In the Godhead, these 'unities' (that which constitutes the relations and that which is constituted by the relations) have a simultaneity, but in the order of intelligibility the unity which constitutes the relations has priority. In the Godhead, 'monarchy' and *perichoresis* are simultaneous just as the Father's begetting and the Son's being begotten are simultaneous, but in the order of intelligibility, origination precedes mutual indwelling. This is why a trinitarian theology which seeks to have the *perichoresis* without the 'monarchy' is deeply flawed. Inasmuch as one testifies to the perichoresis, one upholds the monarchy and orthodoxy; but inasmuch as one denies the monarchy, one negates the possibility of the perichoresis which would be heretical.

When a man loves a woman who has yet to return love, he loves in hope of a unity. When a mother loves her baby, she may hope for reciprocation, but she loves because a unity already exists. When a lover is unrequited or rejected - as is the case in the Crucifixion - there is sorrow. The future is lost. If there were only one divine person and that person was crucified on Good Friday, the future would be lost because a unity between Christ and humanity would be precluded by our rejection of him. However, the unity, in the Spirit,

between the Father and the Son does not depend on us; God continues to be love and to love us even while we are sinners. God's love for us is not affected by our unreciprocation. And the Son who is raised up by the Father persists in unreciprocated, never-ending love of us because he is constituted by the Father's love which does not *depend* on reciprocation.

The love of God is not a moral achievement *of* God; God is love. If God is for us, who can be against? Now it is true that, in Christ, we all share a unity with one another as the brothers and sisters of the one who is constituted by the Father's love. We should try to love one another as the Father loves the Son and as Christ loves the Church, and in this way a social doctrine of the Trinity shows the unity between our evangelical mission and the faith which motivates it. But when you curse me and we fail to create community, I must bless you. In other words, the love of God is realized in our world even when 'community' is not realized. To say otherwise is to deny the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice. We can never forget that "he first loved us" and our mission to love does not depend on reciprocation.

With regard to the Father's 'monarchy', we should not try to imagine a time when the Son and the Spirit were not. However, if we overemphasize a personalistic understanding of relation and 'person', we fall into the trap of saying that if God is love then this could only be the love of fully mutual, reciprocated "interpersonal relations". In doing so, we forget the origin of trinitarian love. We are sometimes so sure that divine love is only possible in ways that reflect our own experience of love that we forget that experience of love which makes our own personhood possible. Before we were "persons", in the philosophical and (unfortunately) in the legal sense, we should have been loved by our parents. "Before" the generation of the Son, "before" the personhood of the Son (if we may be permitted to speak

in this dangerous manner), the Son "was" loved. He was loved, to paraphrase the beautiful image of the Council of Toledo, *in utero Patris*.

Thus, we cannot separate the unity which is established by the Father's unoriginate love from the reciprocation of this love in the *perichoresis*. True, the hope of love - in families and communities - is mutuality and reciprocation, but all human society must teach love and, thus, all love has an origin. Karl Rahner's insistence on the Father as absolute unoriginate helps us not only overcome the 'threat of tritheism', but also to speak meaningfully of this intratrinitarian love. How much less secure would we be in our attempts to speak of a divine community if we did not have Rahner's theological witness to the unity of the Holy Trinity.

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