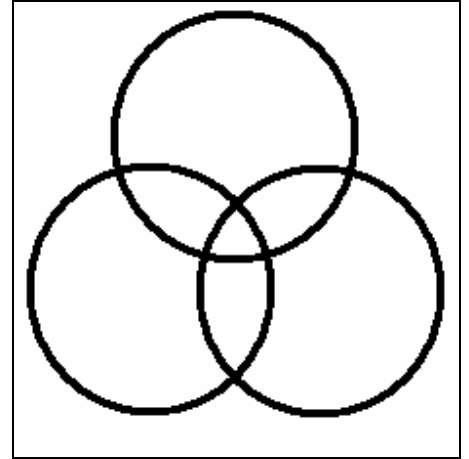


Rethinking the Shape of the Trinity

Anne Kim

Picture the Trinity. One of the images that comes to mind is likely the one shown here: the three interlocking circles of one of the most enduring symbols of the Trinity. Here I will set aside the technical term of Borromean Rings and refer to it as the TriCircle symbol, in hopes that this name is more readily understandable.



While we think of this Trinitarian symbol in holy or even near-mystical ways, it bears a noticeable resemblance to a Venn diagram, one of the simple types of graphs showing areas of similarity and difference. It would be tempting to think that the similarity to a Venn diagram is just a coincidence. But when we review the Athanasian creed in its descriptions of the Trinity, a large section of that creed reads very much as if someone is describing a Venn diagram as it catalogs what is shared and what is distinct.

When iconoclasts insist that we should make no image of God, the risk being considered is that an image could mislead us to worship some other God than the God we know, to substitute our thoughts about God for the reality of God. In modern Trinitarian theology, this one question has persisted: have we done that with the Trinity?

I have no basic objection to images of God, but every image does raise some questions. How well does the symbol reflect our thoughts? How well do our thoughts reflect the reality of God? My goal in this piece is to reconsider some of our thoughts about the Trinity by considering the images we use to reflect our thoughts.

Critiquing the TriCircle Symbol

An image is like any other analogy: it makes its point, but you can press it too far. At some point, the usefulness will break down. In the case of the classic TriCircle depiction of the Trinity, the point is that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct, in some ways alike, and inseparable. In this, it makes its point and has proved its usefulness. I expect this image of the Trinity will continue to endure.

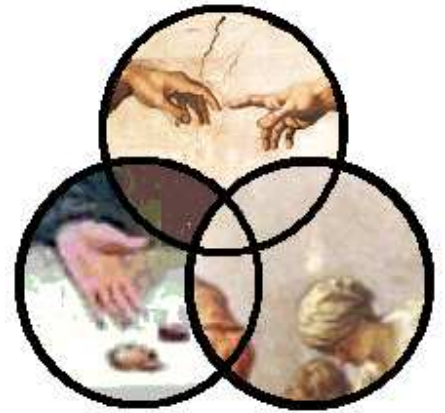
The TriCircle symbol also partially reflects that God the Father is the origin of the Word and the Spirit: that they owe their very being to him. We might debate which of the two lower circles stands for the Son and which for the Spirit, but the upper circle is God the Father. In him and from him the Word and Spirit originate.

However, as useful as the image is, it has its drawbacks. It is completely impersonal. Father, Son and Spirit are reduced to geometric shapes. The Being of God is shown to have certain attributes of perfection, but this image of God has relatively little content other than perfection and interlinked three-in-oneness; it does not represent much of what we know about God. Also, in contrast to all the thoughts of God we have known through the Bible, the TriCircle God is seen in isolation. He does not interact with creation. He does not interact with people. The TriCircle God shows no intentions, plans no future, describes no will, proclaims no salvation. The TriCircle image does not show God in action or God with a purpose: this image of God has no direction. Here we try to portray God as he is in himself, and we portray God as he has chosen not to be: in isolation from us. In this abstraction, we have removed creation and humanity from our understanding of God; here God has no context. If God desires or intends our ideas about Himself to include how he loves the world, then our attempt to be objective has fundamentally obscured the picture in that respect.

Alternate image #1: TriCircle with Person and Content

The first alternate image of the Trinity I would suggest has God in context.

This next symbol starts with the basic and familiar layout, but adds to it some consideration that God can only be understood in context, and that the context in which God is known is not abstract and impersonal. The accompanying artwork plainly calls for someone with better artistic skills than I have - or at least better image editing skills! If the image gives at least the general idea, that will be all I can hope. The image now in the "Father" circle



is God reaching for Adam, detail from the Michelangelo *Creation of Adam* fresco in the Sistine Chapel. The image in the "Son" circle is from Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, with certain elements arranged so that we see Christ's hand offering bread and wine. In the "Holy Spirit" circle we see some detail from Jean Restout II's *Pentecost*, with a flame of holy fire resting on a disciple's head.

In this arrangement the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are seen as they are known to us: in actions that have become fundamental parts of the Christian understanding of God. While these actions of God are already iconic in their own right and have already taken their place in the Christian understanding of God, I would draw attention to some similarities among these actions. In all three cases, the action shows God reaching for or touching us, and in all three cases this contact with God fundamentally transforms us. There is a sense also in which these actions define the relationship of God with the world.

In Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, we see God the Father in a scene from the Book of Genesis reaching out to touch the First Man. Genesis relates that as soon as God had created mankind, in his next words he blessed them. If we read God's actions as indicative of God's purpose, then God created mankind in order to bless mankind. Again in the *Last Supper* we see images of God touching the world, and the down-to-earth physicality of the God who hands us bread and wine, vividly bound to his own body and blood in which he shared our humanity so that we, then, have an enduring taste of his divinity. In *Pentecost*, we see God coming to live within us, transforming his

people so that we, too, can share the very mind of God.

It is no mere accident that these three images by which we so readily recognize God all portray actions in which God initiates and maintains fellowship with us. God's actions toward us are intimate and personal, approaching us at each turn, culminating with God's own Spirit living within us and our becoming God's holy temple in which he lives.

Is this an accurate portrayal of God as he is in himself? If we are to consider that God's nature is unchanging, then "Immanuel" – God with us – is not a late-coming addition to the intentions and nature of God. In each of the three images here, God is revealed as God with us. If we take this as basic and fundamental to God's character, then it must be allowed to have its implications for our thoughts about God. God can never be God as he is in himself – God in isolation – if he has determined himself to be God with us. He can never be the distant, unknowable, impersonal power, the beautiful isolated perfection and untouchable, unapproachable holiness beyond our grasp. Each action that we consider shows God coming to us, blessing us, and seeking fellowship with us. God's approach to man is a recurring theme in the Bible, and God's fellowship with man is portrayed there in vividly intimate terms. It is not only the symbolic and visionary book of Revelation which shows God ultimately consummating a marriage with his people, but this marriage is a staple Hebrew image of God, one also seen in the New Testament not only in Paul but also in Christ as he repeatedly compares himself to a bridegroom. Here we see God who with a human touch restores our humanity, God who gives himself to us in a way that is intended to be permanent in our lives.

Alternate image #2: Outward-reaching TriCircle



The next of the alternate images I would envision still contains three circles, but now concentric ones like the ripples in a pond. (Image public domain courtesy of Wikipedia, altered.) These circles do not remain still; they are ever reaching out toward, ever expanding, ever sending forth the presence of God. This image emphasizes the origin of all things in the Father and the dynamic action of God. If we take the conventional ordering of the first person of the Trinity as the Father and the second person of the Trinity as Christ, the Word of God, then this image reflects the work of the Word being sent out into the world, in forming God's thought into created reality, into revealed thoughts, and into God incarnate where we meet the fullness of God in bodily form. Through the Word also the Spirit goes forth into the world. Here it is clearer that the Word and Spirit have their origin in the Father, and that through them God reaches out into the world, communicates with us, and shares his presence. In this concentric, expanding image, God now has direction and purpose and movement. The world to which God relates is now part of the picture. The approaching and outward-reaching movement of God also forms the promise of a future of God's presence throughout all things.

This picture too has its drawbacks. While a ripple shows the center as the origin and implies a world at the horizon, that smallness of the center is not quite what we want to say about God as the origin of all things. And there are still shortcomings such as the impersonal shapes in this particular image of God. Maybe someday a skilled artist might help us here.

Also, this image barely suggests what it should better portray: that as the Holy Spirit and the Word fill us, we become partakers of the divine nature, new centers of the outgoing ripple of God's presence in the world. Here we, like God, seek to accomplish the blessing of those around us, seek to draw others into fellowship, to convey the same love and human touch which God conveys, to relay the Spirit of God to others. The image of the Living God is inextricably bound up with the people of God. It is an image of God who breaks the barriers of isolation, loneliness, and separation, God who is always reaching and always moving forward, who has no boundaries.

This outward-moving ripple depicting the action of God in the world is related to our understanding of baptism, and not by the superficial coincidence that both involve water. In baptism, God immerses us in himself, cleanses us, gives us new birth, and in his Name transforms who we are. This mirrors what we have said about God's actions already based on the other images we have reviewed. In baptism we see God touching the world, touching each person in turn as we pronounce over each new person the name of Father, Son, and Spirit so that the circle of God's presence is felt in ever-wider contexts.

In the context of Trinitarian studies

It is true enough that this study could easily be placed in our understanding simply as favoring an economic understanding of the Trinity which understands God through divine actions, rather than an immanent understanding of the Trinity which seeks to understand God in his inner being. I view the image of God as he is in himself to be inherently incomplete and, taken by itself, to be essentially misleading about the nature of God – the very thing it intends to describe – and the nature of the world.

God as he is in himself has no actions and no intentions towards us. God as he is in himself does not reveal himself to us. God as we know him acts on our behalf, reaches out to us, and reveals himself. It follows that "God as he is in himself" is God as we hypothesize and imagine, rather than God as we know him. Our revealed glimpses into the life of God before creation are slim. In the act of creation, God disavows his isolation in favor of an outward-focused love of creation. Again in the act of Incarnation, God rejects isolation in favor of involvement. One more time in the coming of the Holy Spirit, God meets us within our own hearts and minds and comes to remain with us. In the intended future, the isolation of God – and the isolation of man – will be ended forever, with the people of God as the bride and with God himself as the bridegroom. Then the involvement of God with man will reach its consummation. This perspective is lost when we portray God in isolation.

While we may make able arguments for this perspective showing God in isolation, I would submit that this perspective cannot legitimately claim the place of the ultimate knowledge of God. The quest for the Immanent Trinity is a quest for God as he is in himself, without regard to creation. This is an attempt to pierce beyond this world, an attempt which shows our inclination to see this world as not quite real or not fully worthwhile, as fundamentally divided and separated from the realities of God. It is a perspective which assumes that the world is not essential to the understanding of God, and may even be an obstacle. Our solution is to strain beyond the world, beyond creation to find God there. God's solution is the opposite: he draws the world to himself, and rather than draw us into an eternal abstraction, he draws the world –and himself – into an eternally realized incarnation. Our view of a world fundamentally divided and separated from the realities of God is precisely the kind of world that God's actions seek to transform. The God that we know – the God who acts in history – acts to overcome that division and separation through his repeated acts of reaching out towards us and establishing fellowship with us, acts that he makes a lasting reality in the world.

This submission, then, is not only about these two approaches to knowing the Trinity, it is also about moving the proclamation of the Trinity forward from its veneration as dogma back out into the streets as kerygma: the proclamation of the goodness of God and the involvement of God as the foundation of the promise of the world's redemption. It is difficult to proclaim or preach God as he is in himself; God as he is in himself has no interactions with us that need proclamation. However, the message of God in context, God in action is a message of the God who touches us, who transforms our lives. In a continuation of the act of creation, God transforms the world itself from something we need to get beyond in order to understand God, into something which bears and reveals the presence of God.

Anne Kim is a programmer with a specialty in high-volume data analysis and best-fit logical models. As a lay theologian, her primary interest is an interdisciplinary approach to theology, apologetics, evangelism, and Christian life. She also has an interest in the crossover between theology and art, particularly in the area of visions of paradise.