

# THE RENEWAL OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

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There are three senses in which it would be possible to pursue the topic of this presentation. First and most obvious, there is the renewal that has occurred within theology of the whole subject matter of the Trinity. This is perhaps my fullest theme for today. But there follows from it a second theme: the renewal of theology as such which follows from recent developments of Trinitarian thought. As a discipline, theology, like any other, waxes and wanes. The great movements of the sixties and seventies, liberation in its personal, political and gender dimensions, has much occupied theology of the second half of the twentieth century. This is the direction, which the reformer of the early twentieth century, Karl Barth, suggested theology should take. Then issues of context and place, came briefly to dominate the agenda. Suddenly, theology became ecological as well as liberational. The gains for the discipline in these developments were mixed, and failed to find adequate coherence or consolidation to form a renewal of theology.

In the third instance, there might be a renewal that is given to the Church through a renaissance of Trinitarian theology. Certainly, the moves towards a distinctively Christian praxis, which have grown out of recent liberation and ecological theology, find a solid theological grounding in the deepened emphasis upon the relevance of soteriology for Christology and the entire doctrine of God. The renewal of Trinitarian theology is primarily a theological return to the economy of salvation as the place where Christian theology must begin its reflection. The long tussle with atheism which has sapped the energies of a generation of Western theologians turned our sights towards philosophy as the proper starting point, but as Dr Jensen has argued, there was a certain less than accidental coincidence between the whole movement of atheism and the earlier demise of truly Trinitarian thinking. Perhaps the renewal of the doctrine of the trinity offers us not only a way out of that modernist cul-de-sac, but also a way in which the life and ministry of the Church can again become central to the subject matter of theology.

As the modern Church has moved out into the non-Western world, there has been a sharp encounter with other faiths and with a charismatic renewal of Christianity. In different ways, each of these developments cry out for a renewed theology of the Holy Spirit, but the western theology in which missionaries and missionary churches were trained knew very little of how the Spirit might be integral to theological thought. While there has been renewal in the life and mission of the Church in these developments, the renewal of Trinitarian theology promises more. The renewal of the Church must be assisted by the achievement of greater theological coherence and breadth can be achieved in its understandings of the dialogue with other faiths and the experience of the Spirit. It might not be too much to hope for a renewal, then, in the life and mission of the Church as result of a renewal of a distinctively Christian trinitarian understanding of God.

## 1. Two Cheers for the Holy Trinity: The Revolution of Karl Barth

The theological revolution Fomented by Karl Barth after the first world war is remarkable for many things. His focus on the person and work of Christ has been of central importance for many of the Churches shaped by his theology, including the UCA. For others, it was his repudiation of a kind of liberal theology, which had largely shaped the church and the academy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it the thoroughly Trinitarian caste of Barth's thought which makes him the starting point for today's reflections.

While both Schleiermacher and Barth point to the centrality of Christology for Christian theology, it is only Barth who sees that this leads in the direction of a renewal of Trinitarian theology. Barth's theology is unique among systematics of that time in that reflection on God's being as triune is made programmatic for his entire Dogmatics.

The ways in which trinitarianism is foundational for Barth's dogmatics develop and modulate within the *Church Dogmatics*. Perhaps least satisfactory, is his early reflection on the formalism of revelation as implying a three-fold structure: Revealer, Revelation and Revealedness. "God reveals Himself through Himself" was a way of expressing this structure, which lent Barth's early volumes a trinitarian shape. A more promising direction is indicated in Barth's "being-in-act" ontology. This is developed in II/1 in relation to the Reality of God. That God has God's being in God's act, is a central formula for Barth's understanding of the being and reality of God. God's act, of course, points back to the events recorded in the biblical narrative, the salvation of Israel and the event of Jesus Christ. The God whom we worship is the God whose being is revealed in these events. Thus Barth points to the narrative of salvation as the locus for the manifestation of the being of God. The Trinitarian implications of this move are profound.

In later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth comes even closer to the historical records of the New Testament. The being of Jesus Christ is manifested in the narrative identity descriptions given in the Gospel accounts. The focus upon narrative leads to the original contours of Barth's mature Christology. The final part volume, points to the possible development of a doctrine of the Holy Spirit, which was never fully realized. From a focus on the form of the revelatory event to the focus on the particular events of the life of Jesus Christ, Barth moves closer to the heart of Trinitarian faith.

Yet for all that, Barth's doctrine is imperfectly realized. The formalism of Barth's early trinitarianism, kept the Trinity at the level of a formal "naming" of God, which the later emphases began to challenge. Further, his insistence on the distinction between the immanent Trinity (God *a se*) and the economic Trinity (God in the revelation), as a means of protecting the freedom of God, meant that the way was open for sustaining an abstract concept of God, *a se*. The failure to develop adequately a doctrine of the Spirit was not merely a matter of time, but perhaps reflected his focus on revelational theology rather than experiential theology. The *Filioque* clause, which Barth upheld, further inclines his theology towards a form of subordinationism. Finally, Barth's adherence to Augustine's personal model, meant that the possibilities and limits of a social model of the trinity were not explored. Barth's christocentrism, in so many ways a revolutionary change, failed to develop into a fully orbited trinitarianism. His views are reflected in the less than fully developed trinitarianism of the *Basis of Union*.

## 2. Theology of Karl Rahner

Karl Rahner observed that trinity had become an apparently arcane doctrine with little or no practical significance for XTY: "One might almost dare to affirm that if the doctrine of the Trinity were erased as false, most religious literature could be preserved almost unchanged through the process." (*Theological Investigations*, Vol 4, 79)

Rahner traces a movement back to Aquinas whereby the discussion of the being of the One God is prior to the discussion of the naming of God as triune. This had the effect, he avers, of placing matters of substance in relation to the one-ness of God and secondary or formal matters in relation to the trinity of God. Thus discussion is biased away from seeing Trinitarian discussion

as the “heart of the matter.” The tradition of the west has grown to regard the doctrine of the trinity as a formal matter, while the truly important discussion of the being and nature of God can avoid this topic. In classroom discussion of trinity today, there is usually a student who wonders why if God is triune, there are not four or five persons. It is as if the tri-unity of God were a mere accident of form and the essential reality of God is prior to that. Discussion with biblical scholars often takes a similar route, if three then why not more—surely the biblical names for God are multiple. But the point of Rahner’s and Barth’s teaching is that the Trinity is more than a name. While this emphasis on naming may be traced back to Aquinas, we need to remember that for Aquinas the matter of naming cannot be separated from considerations of being. This came later, with the rise of nominalism.

In Rahner’s view, even “incarnation” is not an anchor against Trinitarian neglect.

For when the Incarnation of God is spoken of theological and religious intention today is concentrated on the fact that “God” has become man, that “a” person of the Trinity has assumed flesh—but not on that fact that this person is precisely that of the Word, Logos. One could suspect that as regards the catechism of the head and the heart, in contrast to the catechism in books, the Christian idea of Incarnation would not have to change at all, if there were no Trinity. (Ibid)

Yet Rahner’s argument is that the Incarnation, rightly understood, inevitably leads us in the direction of Trinitarian thinking. In his view, the Incarnation is a central event in the narrative of God’s saving work on the world’s behalf. The history of God’s saving work, the economy of salvation, is in fact the self-manifestation of God. In the saving work of God, God does not merely offer salvation as a commodity, but God offers God-self to us. Thus he is able to maintain in a programmatic way that the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity *is* the economic Trinity. Although Rahner does not move towards, the “social” model of the Trinity, his work heralds a shift away from the psychological analogy as privileged means of explication of the mystery and towards a focus on the mystery of the Trinity as the mystery of salvation.

### **3. The Cross of Christ as Revelation of God’s being : Moltmann**

Jurgen Moltmann’s early criticism of Barth’s notion of self-revelation of God asked whether it meant God’s eternal self-understanding? Does the doctrine of the Trinity mean the eternal Trinitarian reflection of God upon himself, a matter of ‘the pure present of the eternal, without history or future?’<sup>1</sup> For Moltmann the absence of a clear answer to this question leaves problematic the sense in which the self-revelation of God can be tied to the “little bundle of reports” on the existence of Jesus Christ, which date from the days of the Roman Empire. Yet Barth also insists on the absolute identity between this bundle of reports and the divine self-revelation. Moltmann’s early work insists on greater clarity in Barth on the relationship between the historical narrative and the triune God therein manifested, and he suspects that Barth’s development of the theme leaves us with a gap all as intimidating and problematic as the great ditch of Lessing’s designation.

A focus on the history of God’s activity, with its horizon of hope, has led Moltmann in later work to become more explicit about the doctrine of the Trinity and the “concrete history” of God. The historical point at which God is most clearly revealed calls for a focus on the cross of Christ. This event in Moltmann’s view can only be understood in Trinitarian terms.

The content of the doctrine of the Trinity is the real cross of Christ himself. The form of the crucified Christ is the Trinity.<sup>ii</sup>

In the event of the cross, God suffers with us, God suffers from us, God suffers for us. God is characterized by the relationality of love. Divine being is ruptured on the cross, in a drama that is constitutive of God's being and history. It is in the "concrete history" of God, the event of the love of the Son and the grief of the Father, from which issues the Spirit, who opens up the future and creates life. The event of the cross...is taken up into the very being of the triune God, where it is constitutive of God's triune being and history.<sup>iii</sup>

Whereas Barth is careful to maintain the distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity, Moltmann is closer to the position which Rahner has articulated of their effective equivalence if not identity. For Moltmann it becomes clear that the trinity must be read as a concept that stands in the place of God as supreme Substance or God as absolute Subject.<sup>iv</sup> That is, through accepting the possibility of a history of God, Moltmann posits that the trinity is the only concept needed to define the being of God. In Moltmann we see the adoption of a social model of the Trinity. Moltmann's narration of the history of God leaves us, at times, with a greatly weakened sense of God's unity and a view that verges on tritheism. It is well to remember that the social model is only an analogy, and needs to be supplemented with that of the personal model.

#### **4. Soteriology to the Fore: Liberation and Feminist Theology**

Rahner's and Moltmann's focus on the revelatory significance of the economy of salvation accords well with other cultural emphases of the twentieth century. This century saw a declining interest in issues of classical metaphysics and closer attention paid to the explication of human experience. As Bernard Lonergan remarked, it was natural for theology to pay closer attention to this cultural shift and to place human experience near the center of the enterprise.<sup>v</sup> Following the cultural shifts of the Post World War two period, it was natural that a theological focus should be given to the experience of the excluded, the poor and women.

In Liberation Theology the focus turned to the experience of oppression by third world poor. The burden of soteriology was to understand what salvation would mean in the lives of socially, politically and economically oppressed. How could the work of Jesus be understood and experienced as salvific in their experience? Liberation theology drew inspiration from the liberating praxis of Jesus of Nazareth, but soon turned to the saving work of the Christ of Faith. Not content with an imitative soteriology, it found its hope in the liberative activity of the God who works in history to overcome the systems of evil. A focus on the saving work of God the Son pointed this theology in a Trinitarian direction. In the work of Leonard Boff, we find a deeper exploration of the liberative implications of Trinitarian thinking.<sup>vi</sup>

Drawing upon the social model of the Trinity, Boff found in the essentially egalitarian relationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the model for a just social order. Just as God lives in a relationship of mutuality and love, so should social systems reproduce such an ordering of relationships. This ordering of relationships is precisely what is lacking in most South American countries, and the cause of justice was linked with the economy of the Trinity.

In his later work, Boff links the Christian understanding of God as triune with a contemplation that embraces the entire creation.

...another clearly contemplative, mystical aspect found in the Christian scriptures... affirms that both the incarnate Son and the Spirit are concerned with the mystery of creation. They are present in it like ferment in the process of ascension toward the reign of the Trinity. We may say that the universe shares in the blessings conferred on humankind. It participates in the resurrection of all flesh. There is a future for the stars, for the mountains, for plants, for animals, and for people.

The communion life of the Trinitarian God is then to be shared by the whole creation, in some undisclosed form. Boff is thus able to link the themes of ecology and liberation in his vision of the kingdom of the Triune God.

A similar movement was seen in Feminist Theology. Early feminists were impressed by the liberating praxis of Jesus, and for some the theological tradition of Father and Son seemed to be irretrievably patriarchal. Yet the irony was that the theological elaboration of the second person of the Trinity allowed for more gender inclusive naming than the historical elaboration of the personhood of Jesus of Nazareth! This possibility was soon grasped by theological writers of each gender.<sup>vii</sup> While Rosemary Ruether wondered if a male saviour can help women, Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine Mowry LaCugna explored the rich resources of Trinitarian theology for insights into personhood and relationship.<sup>viii</sup>

Insisting the woman is as much in the image of God as man, Johnson presses the critique of the traditional Trinitarian theology in the name of a re-imaged Trinity. Arguing that the name of Yahweh might as well be translated as "She Who is", Johnson suggests that such a translation may shake off the shackles of idolatry and be a blessing for women. Noting that the overwhelming weight of usage has been on the side of male imagery, Johnston insists that there is nothing essentially necessary about this state of language. (211). Her sense of the need of female imagery is clear.

At this point in the living tradition, I believe that we need a strong dose of explicitly female imagery to break the unconscious sway that male trinitarian imagery holds over the imaginations of even the most sophisticated thinkers.<sup>ix</sup>

One example involves following the image of friendship together with the naming of God as Holy Wisdom, leading to the metaphor of Sophia-God as a Trinity of friendship.

The love of friendship is the very essence of God. Hidden Abyss, Word, and Spirit mutually indwell in a companionable communion of unimaginable strength.<sup>x</sup>

Johnson is careful to avoid the excesses of the social model and insists that God always remains other than the metaphors we develop to understand the divine being. By stressing the metaphorical character of God language, she achieves a sense that the triune identity can never be fully plumbed by either personalist or social models. Yet if her trinity is beyond naming, does there not open up a distance between the economic and immanent trinities, which would undercut much of the development of contemporary trinitarian thought?

## **5. Eschatology and Ecology: Pannenberg and Denis Edwards**

Wolfart Pannenberg has extended the development of Trinitarian thought into the realm of creation. While the tradition affirmed that the work of God in the creation was attributed to the work of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit without distinction, Pannenberg argues for a distinctive role for each person of the Trinity. Thus the role of the Father is as the origin of

creatures in their contingency, granting them existence, caring for them, and making possible their continued life and independence. The Son is identified as the principle of otherness and distinction and hence as the origin of the different creatures in their specific distinctiveness. This role of the Son is inextricably linked with that of the Holy Spirit, who is the life-giving principle to which all creatures owe life, movement and activity.

In his *Jesus the Wisdom of God*, Australian theologian Denis Edwards develops an ecological theology. Like Pannenberg, Edwards affirms that creation is the action of the whole Trinity, but it needs to be seen as involving the distinct roles of the Trinitarian Persons, which are not only “appropriated” to them, but “proper” to them. Finding in the Trinity the themes of mutuality and reciprocity, Edwards affirms that the Trinity’s interaction with creation is characterized by the vulnerability and liberating power of love. This Trinitarian love respects both the freedom of human beings and the integrity of natural processes.<sup>xi</sup>

In this view of creation, every creature has intrinsic value because they exist as modes of divine self-expression and presence. It follows that:

...the rain forest of the Amazon is to be understood as the self-expression of the divine Trinity. It is a sacrament of God’s presence. Its vitality and exuberance spring from the immanent presence of the Spirit, the giver of life. They express the Trinitarian love of life. The rain forest, in its form, function and beauty as a harmonious biotic community is the work of art of divine Wisdom. The species of plants and animals which are being destroyed forever are modes of God’s self-communication and presence.<sup>xii</sup>

Directions for an ecological ethic develop in a careful explication of the meaning of the triune love in mutuality and reciprocity. In this way, Edwards draws upon Trinitarian theology to flesh out an ethical framework for ecological responsibility. The distance between God and the creation has been bridged by the unfolding events of the history of God.

## 6. Conclusion

In these various directions, Trinitarian theology has undergone a renewal in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. As the encounter with other faiths has progressed to mutually interpretive dialogue, it has become clear that a generalized notion of God does not advance mutual understanding so much as a careful plumbing of the distinctive elements of each faith, with its narratives and texts.<sup>xiii</sup> In this exercise, a dialogical restatement of Trinitarian doctrine has enabled clarity about the God of the Christian faith to be questioned and in turn to question the insights of other faiths. A renewal of the charisms of the Spirit seems to be enabled by an emphasis upon the diversity in the heart of God. At the same time, a way of holding the more enthusiastic of the brothers and sisters in the fold of the Church is developing in the emphasis upon the unity of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is not too much to hope that a renewal of Trinitarian theology might be the means of a richer entry into the Mission of God by the Church of our day.

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<sup>i</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch, London: SCM Press, 1967, 55.

<sup>ii</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: the Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden. London: SCM Press, 1974, 246.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Anne Hunt, *Trinity: Nexus of the Mysteries of Christian Faith*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005, 53
- <sup>iv</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, Sanfrancisco: Harper & Row, 1981, 10- 20.
- <sup>v</sup> Bernard Lonergan, "Unity and Plurality: The Coherence of Christian Truth." in *Third Collection; Papers by Bernard J. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985). 246-247.
- <sup>vi</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*. Translated by Paul Burns. Liberation and Theology Series 2. London: burnes & Oates, 1988.
- <sup>vii</sup> Geoffrey R Lilburne, "Christology and Feminism: the Relevance of the Trinity" in *Horizons: Journal of the College Theology Society*, 1984.
- <sup>viii</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York: Crossroad, 1992 ; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* , New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- <sup>ix</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, 212.
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid*, 218.
- <sup>xi</sup> Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology*, Homebush, NSW: St Pauls, 1995, 121-122.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.
- <sup>xiii</sup> See for example Veli-Matti Karkkeinen, *Trinity and religious pluralism: the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology of religions* Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004.