Where Do We Stand in Trinitarian Theology?

Resources, Revisions, and Reappraisals

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THE "RENAISSANCE OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY"—REVISITED

TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY TODAY

Twenty years ago, I wrote a brief introduction to a volume of essays entitled *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, under the heading "The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems and Tasks."[1] The book is a collection of papers, originally delivered at the first international conference of the Research Institute in Systematic Theology, King's College London, in 1990. Apart from giving a brief overview of the papers published in the volume, the introduction was intended as a kind of interim report on the new interest that had been given to the doctrine of the Trinity and its significance for the task of Christian theology at the end of the twentieth century. While noting the tremendous variety of approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity and the fact that the increased engagement with the doctrine of the Trinity is not restricted to one discipline of theology but somehow embraces all theological disciplines and the whole project of Christian theology in relation to its cultural settings, the introduction tried to point to a number of factors

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1. Christoph Schwöbel, "The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems and Tasks," in idem, ed., *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 1–30.

and motives that had contributed to the increased interest in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The first of these factors mentioned is the encounter of Western theology with the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy in ecumenical conversations. These encounters have not only confronted Western theology with the significance that Eastern theology has ascribed to the doctrine of the Trinity, but also have pointed to effects this focus on the Trinity has for the practice of worship and for views of community organization in the church in the wider society. Apart from the notorious question of the *filioque* that once led to schism between Eastern and Western Christianity, there is also the issue of the personhood of the Holy Spirit, which Eastern theology raised as a problematic aspect of Western traditions. Encountering another tradition in ecumenical conversations not only leads to discovering the riches and problems of the other tradition but also encourages the critical engagement with one's own tradition and its history as it is reflected in the eyes of the other. It is in this context that the question of the differences and similarities between both traditions arises. Is it correct to see decisive differences between both traditions with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, although they both profess the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed? If so, where would these differences then be located—in doctrine, in forms of church order, or in the practice of Christian worship? How should one assess the influence of complex historical and cultural factors?

The second of the factors mentioned for the new interest in trinitarian theology draws attention to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity has been marginalized, as Karl Rahner so memorably diagnosed. Is it true that the distinction between the dogmatic treatises *De Deo uno* and *De Deo trino* indicates that the doctrine of the Trinity had become largely irrelevant for Western theology, relegated to spheres of abstract speculation and the liturgy? Is Rahner's diagnosis correct that this marginalization, which has the effect that many Christians have a monotheist faith, lacking a distinctive Christian trinitarian profile, is connected to a separation of the inner processions and the economic missions of the Trinity? Do we find here the reason that the immanent and economic Trinity were not seen as constitutively related so that matters of biblical exegesis and questions of dogmatic reflection are pursued as independent exercises, despite all Protestant protestations that doctrine should be based on Scripture alone? If the diagnosis is correct, will Rahner's therapy, expressed in the slogan "the immanent Trinity *is* the economic Trinity, and the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity," bring the desired recovery, restoring the doctrine of the Trinity to the center of the Christian faith?

The third group of factors mentioned in my 1995 introduction refers to the relationship between philosophical theism and its modern twin, philosophical atheism, and a trinitarian doctrine of God. It is noted that the philosophical debate on the existence of God and the coherence of theism have, at least sometimes, ignored the Christian confession that God is triune. Conversely, trinitarian theologies, it seems, have at least sometimes ignored the thorny questions of how confessing God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit shapes the views of divine essence and existence, of the divine attributes and their relationship to divine agency. Twenty years ago, systematic theologians and philosophical theologians moved in different circles of thought and exchange. The new interest in trinitarian theology, however, has motivated the analysis of questions of the doctrine of God in the *confinium* of Christian doctrinal theology and philosophical theology, so that the doctrine of the Trinity is now a focus of lively debate in philosophical theology.

The fourth group of factors points to the connections between the understanding of God and the understanding of human persons and human society, especially in the way both come together in the understanding of the church. The temptation to draw easy correlations between a unipersonal image of God and authoritarian structures in church and society and contrast them to a trinitarian view of God and a correlative view of church and society, where personal particularity and social community are respected and celebrated, is criticized in the 1995 introduction: "It would be theologically disastrous if one criticized the projection of certain views of the divine nature on the order of human society for its alienating effects and then proceeded by projecting a view of desirable human relationships on the divine being."[2] Nevertheless, in spite of this criticism of a way of doing trinitarian theology, it is acknowledged that, because theology always has social effects, although they may be quite indirect and mediated in various ways, the question of the relationship of our images of the divine and our view of social relationships has to be analyzed. Does it matter for our engagement in the social world whether our theology is trinitarian or not?

The question of how this new interest in trinitarian theology should be interpreted already played a role twenty years ago. Is it a revolution moving theological thinking forward into new areas of theological exploration, or a restoration of an already established doctrine, a return to conciliar orthodoxy? Clearly, both elements played a role in the engagement with the Trinity. On the one hand, it was a new development if one considered the established forms

2. Ibid., 11.

of theological thought in the time immediately before the renewal of trinitarian interests. On the other hand, this step forward beyond the fashionable theologies of the time consisted in taking seriously the developments in the history of doctrine that had played a formative role in establishing Christian orthodoxy. At the time, it seemed that the metaphor of renaissance or revival captured most accurately the spirit of the new way of doing theology. Theologians employed this metaphor well aware that trinitarian theology was never completely dead, although it may not have had a high point on the theological agendas. And, of course, that there had been quite a number of previous revivals, for instance the conscious turn to trinitarian thinking in the systems of German idealism over against the deistic and theistic reductions of the doctrine of God during the Enlightenment. The interesting question, however, is not whether the metaphor is appropriate but whether the renewed interest in trinitarian theology has produced productive and significant theological developments.

THE FORGOTTEN TRINITY

The papers from the aforementioned conference are, of course, only a small detail of a much larger picture of the development of trinitarian theology. Academic theological conferences do not occur in a vacuum, and their topics do not grow out of academic interest alone. Many more factors influencing this development would have to be taken into account.[3] For the British setting, one particular event needs to be mentioned. The immediate context of the revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity was very much influenced by a Study Commission of the British Council of Churches on "Trinitarian Doctrine Today," which met between November 1983 and May 1988. With Costa Carras and James B. Torrance as their joint chairs, the study commission published a report under the evocative title *The Forgotten Trinity*, a selection of papers with the same title, and a study guide for local churches.[4] The impact of these three pieces should not be underestimated. The report was intended not only to offer trinitarian reorientation in matters of church doctrine on God, but to reshape the life of the churches from a trinitarian perspective.

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3. The story is told more fully by Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

4. *The Forgotten Trinity: 1. The Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today* (London: British Council of Churches [BCC], 1989); *The Forgotten Trinity: 2. A Study Guide on Issues Contained in the Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today* (London: BCC, 1989); Alasdair I. C. Heron, ed., *The Forgotten Trinity: A Selection of Papers Presented to the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today* (London: BCC/CCBI, 1991).

This can most clearly be seen in the study guide, which relates the Trinity to worship, Scripture, tradition, our relationship with God, human relationships, and society. The renaissance of trinitarian theology was from the beginning much more than a new theological orientation. As the work of the BCC Study Commission makes quite clear, it was aimed at reshaping the life of the church in its liturgical, doctrinal, and ethical dimensions.

What are the crucial questions that give direction to such a reshaping as envisaged by the BCC Study Commission? It is still useful today to turn to the seminal paper John Zizioulas presented to the commission, delineating its task and defining its agenda.[5] Zizioulas agrees with the view of Barth and Rahner that the doctrine of the Trinity has become marginalized in the church, both East and West, not only in matters of doctrine, but also with regard to the devotional life of Christians. Does it make a difference whether a prayer is addressed to the Father, as in eucharistic prayers, or to the Son, or to the Spirit, as in other services? The sensibility for the question has, in Zizioulas's view, disappeared in both Eastern and Western churches. Does the doctrine of Trinity have anything to say to the question of personal identity, relationality, and communion, or is that left to sociology or psychology because it is felt that there is nothing distinctive that Christian theology has to contribute? Is there a place for the Trinity in the views of the institution and constitution of the church, or is the foundation of the church understood exclusively along christological lines, so that the shape of ecclesial community is dependent on the historic episcopate and the question of apostolic succession? And what is distinctive about Christian views of monotheism in dialogue with other religions? Is there a trinitarian notion of the one God that is different from arithmetical singularity and embraces a notion of relational unity?

The answers to these questions revolve for Zizioulas around three decisive issues. The first focuses on the relation between God and the world as it is expressed in the relationship between the immanent and the economic Trinity. Is there a distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity which can safeguard against the kind of ontological monism that would make the being of God and the being of the world intrinsically bound up, at the expense of being unable to speak of the freedom of God? Is it right to identify the order of knowing God in the divine economy with the ontological question of God's being? Zizioulas emphatically denies Rahner's identification of the economic and the immanent Trinity:

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5. John Zizioulas, "The Doctrine of the Trinity Today: Suggestions for an Ecumenical Study," in Heron, ed., *The Forgotten Trinity*, 19–32.

If God *is* Trinity, he must also be outside the Economy. If he cannot be *known* as Trinity except through and in the Economy this should not lead us to construct our Trinitarian doctrine simply on the basis of the Economy. Without an apophatic theology, which would allow us to go beyond the economic Trinity, and to draw a sharp distinction between ontology and epistemology—something that classical Greek thought as well as Western philosophy have been unable to do—or between *being* and *revelation*, God and the world become an unbreakable unity and God's transcendence is at stake.[6]

The second big issue that Zizoulas identifies, and which has shaped the discussion of trinitarian theology ever since, concerns God's being in Godself. How are threeness and oneness related in God? For Zizioulas, the possible answers to this question boil down to a choice between what he calls "the Augustinian tradition" and "that of the Greek Fathers." If we start from the oneness of God in the sense of the divine *ousia* shared by Father, Son, and Spirit, we cannot logically give primacy to the threeness in God. The Trinity will always remain logically and ontologically secondary: "what is shared is prior to what shares in it."[7] This, however, has far-reaching consequences for the understanding of God and of humanity. Starting from the oneness of God would commit us, Zizioulas insists, to a view that three persons necessarily share in the one divine *ousia*, which, in turn, removes all freedom from the being of God. God is necessarily self-existent, in Zizioulas's words: "The dead ousianic tautology of something existing because it exists."[8] For Zizioulas, the only alternative consists in starting from the Father, the one God, who is the free ground of the being of the Son and the Spirit. This would both give a distinctively Christian view of monotheism, grounded in the freedom of God, and make divine freedom the ground of all created personhood, of who human persons are destined to be in their eschatological participation in the personal communion of the triune God. The choice, according to Zizioulas, is this:

If God's existence is determined by the necessity of his *ousia*, if he is . . . a necessary being, 'being itself' . . . etc., then all existence is bound by necessity. On the other hand, if God's existence is not bound by a ousianic tautology but is caused by a free person, then there is hope also for the creature which by definition *is* faced by the priority of

6. Ibid., 23–24.
7. Ibid., 25.
8. Ibid.

substance, of 'given realities', to be free from these 'givens' to acquire God's way of being in what the Greek Fathers called *theosis*. 'Theosis' is meaningless apart from the liberation of man from the priority of substance over against the person.[9]

Seeing the person of the Father as the free "cause" of the Trinity would also present a solution to the challenging problems of the division between East and West over the *filioque* clause. It would allow for the view that the Son has a mediating function in the procession of the Spirit (*ek patros di'hyiou*) without claiming that the Son is in any sense the cause of the Spirit's procession—a view that the East regards as a relapse into pagan polytheism by claiming two generating principles in the Godhead. The solution that Zizioulas offers in his account of the metaphysics of trinitarian personhood, however, has the price of putting the blame on Augustine, not only for excluding freedom from the being of God but also for the subsequent developments of deism and atheism in the West.[10]

The third big issue that Zizioulas put on the agenda of the Study Commission concerns the relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and ecclesiology. His programmatic call for revision of the traditional ecclesiologies is phrased as an invitation: "Let our doctrine of the Trinity suggest our ways of structuring the Church and celebrating the Eucharist."[11] This call for a trinitarian reformation of the understanding and structures of the church concerns all Christian churches, according to Zizioulas, so that he can say with clear echoes of Galatians 3:28: "on this point there is neither Orthodox, nor Protestant nor Roman Catholic."[12] What does this ecumenical trinitarian re-formation consist in? If the church is to be "a sign and a reflection of God's way of being in creation," Zizioulas argues, it must be understood and structured in a trinitarian way. The christological institution of the church must be supplemented by an account of its pneumatological constitution in order

9. Ibid.

10. Zizioulas suggests in a footnote: "We venture to suggest that the entire issue of Deism and Atheism, culminating in the question whether God exists or does not exist, an issue that has prevailed in modern Western thought particularly since the Enlightenment, derives from the fact that ever since Augustine the West has tended to understand God primarily as substance or *divinitas*. This kind of theology has not only made God a competitive and often antagonistic being in relation to man and the world, thus leading to various forms of atheistic secularisation and humanism, but has also made the question of *how* God exists, i.e. the subject of the Trinity, irrelevant or secondary to modern Western man." Ibid., 31.

11. Ibid., 28.

12. Ibid.

to reflect "the *epicletical* character of Ecclesiology,"[13] which becomes especially apparent in the Eucharist, where the words of the institution and the invocation of the Spirit are both needed in order for the Eucharist—and the church—"to be what it is." Zizioulas calls for a "pneumatologically conditioned ontology whereby nothing exists by itself and in itself, but only as a result of free communion which is precisely the essence of the Trinitarian doctrine in its application to the being of God in himself."[14]

In order to understand what trinitarian theology is today in its various forms and in order to assess the criticisms that have been leveled against it, it is necessary to keep this provocative impetus in mind and consider the challenges that were in this way offered to established ways of doing theology. Has the renaissance of trinitarian theology really led to a new liveliness of theological exchange, and has the original impetus been vindicated by mature theological reflection? Has the renaissance of trinitarian theology helped to recover the sense of authentic Christian doctrine, which could claim to be orthodox by reflecting the spirit of right teaching, or has it led theology astray in such a way that it has deviated from the path of correct teaching?

The Main Questions of Trinitarian Theology

The challenge of trinitarian theology to established ways of theological thinking has one main emphasis. The doctrine of the Trinity is not to be regarded as a specialized subsection of the Christian doctrine of God, but it functions as the framework for doing Christian theology. It is the point from where the whole of Christian teaching finds its integration.[15] The claims go even further than this: without a trinitarian understanding of God, the central Christian practices, Christian worship, the celebration of baptism and the Eucharist, and the Christian life in the church and society lose their specific profile. The point is well captured by Robert Jenson who, in his contribution to *Trinitarian Theology Today* bearing the title "What Is the Point of Trinitarian Theology?," insists that one can only say what the point of trinitarian theology is, if one has already understood that trinitarian theology *is* the point: "All that can be said about the point that Trinitarian theology *has*, will be false unless we simultaneously think the point that Trinitarian theology *is*.'[16] The crucial question is, therefore, How is the doctrine of the Trinity to be understood so

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. See Christoph Schwöbel, "Trinitätslehre als Rahmentheorie des christlichen Glaubens," in idem, *Gott in Beziehung. Studien zur Dogmatik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 24–51.

that trinitarian theology can fulfill this function? This question can be answered by a number of simple theses, pointing to the central questions trinitarian theology has to ask with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity expresses the answer of the Christian faith to the question: "Who is God?"

The question of the identity of God is central to the Christian faith. A Christian act of worship begins with invocation of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and it concludes with the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:24-26), which, in its Christian interpretation, is the blessing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Confessing the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the creed is the answer of the Christian faith to the proclamation of the Gospel in word and sacraments. The importance attached to the question of the identity of the God who is addressed in Christian worship mirrors the significance that is given to God's identity in the biblical witnesses. In the Hebrew Bible, everything seems to revolve around the question of the true identity of God. Worshiping the true God is at the center of Israel's faith in all its different stages, different forms, and in its different settings. Therefore, idolatry, turning away from the true God, or mistaking someone or something else for God, is at the root of all evil that occurs in Israel's history. Knowing God's identity is only possible where God makes Godself known. Therefore, God's self-identification is the core of the question of God's identity.

God's self-identification has two main forms, which can be combined in many ways. God identifies Godself through revealing God's name and through God's acts in history. The name of God remains mysterious and shall not be used in vain, so that the Tetragrammaton is pronounced with the punctuation for "the Lord." The name of God is indirectly referenced and often an identifying description is added. Calling on the name of God and identifying God by definite descriptions are therefore closely related. The logic of God's self-identification follows this pattern: "A identifies himself to B as A (proper name) or as x (definite description) with the purpose Y." The God who identifies Godself with God's proper name also identifies Godself as God in this way as the "One who alone is to be worshiped." Whatever "x" is (e.g., the one "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"; Exod. 20:2), it is exclusively instantiated by "A" who identifies himself in this way. The self-identification of God and God's self-interpretation through God's words and acts are intrinsically connected.

16. Robert W. Jenson, "The Point of Trinitarian Theology," in Schwöbel, ed., *Trinitarian Theology Today*, 43.

This self-identification of her God also defines the identity of Israel, as, for instance, the covenant formula (e.g., Jer. 30:22) demonstrates. While God's self-identification implies a commitment on the side of God, a promise for the future, it also implies an obligation for Israel. The promissory character of God's identification contains in this way an obligatory imperative, which comprises the whole of Israel's existence, both personal and social. Turning away from God is therefore always accompanied by the loss of identity on the part of Israel. On the other hand, the connection between God's self-identification and self-interpretation also means that Israel, both communally and personally, can turn to God as the one who brought liberation in the past. Knowing God's identity on the basis of God's self-identification is therefore the foundation for the life of worship, for addressing God, for praising, petitioning, and giving thanks to God. The understanding of God, the "theology," so to speak, is implied and enacted in the acts of relating to God on the basis of God's relating to God's people.

The witnesses of the New Testament presuppose Israel's experience of the self-identification of God and coordinate the experience of God in Jesus and in the Spirit with Israel's experiences of God. The Easter experience of the vindication of Jesus' witness to God in his life and death prompts the first Christian communities to see in Jesus a new self-identification of God that does not cancel Israel's experiences of God's self-identification but opens Israel's relationship with her God to all people who believe in Jesus. The Easter experience therefore inaugurates for the first Christian communities a view of their life as an ongoing communion with the risen Lord, even in the absence of the personal experience of Jesus in the flesh as a person they could encounter like other persons, through celebrating the Lord's Supper and preaching and hearing the gospel of Christ. This communion is understood as being exclusively constituted by God. The name for this new presence of God, which connects the Christian communities with Jesus and through him with the God of Israel, is the "Spirit," as the early Christian communities said in adapting one of Israel's ways of speaking about the presence of God in action.

In the New Testament, we can see how the integration of the new ways of the presence of God led to a "prototrinitarian grammar" of talking about God.[17] By understanding Jesus as "the Son" and the God of Israel as "the Father," and by interpreting God's presence with the community of believers as "the Spirit," the

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17. I have tried to develop the thesis that there is in the New Testament writings an underlying "proto-trinitarian depth structure" which can be expressed in a grammar in my paper on "Christology and Trinitarian Thought," in *Trinitarian Theology Today*, 112–46. This thesis is further developed in "The Trinity between Athens and Jerusalem," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009): 22–41.

Christian community was enabled to integrate its experience of God through Christ and in the Spirit. It is important to note the distinctive features of this way of talking about God, of addressing God, and of pronouncing the blessing of God to the community of believers. The one God is not simply replaced by Jesus, but Jesus and God are seen in a relationship that does not cancel the unity of God, but nevertheless introduces an element of differentiation in relationship. In confessing Jesus as the Lord, one confesses no other God than the one God of Israel, but one confesses this God in a new way in which God has become present, although this "new way" is eternally part of the being of God. Similarly, the experience of the Spirit is really the experience of the one God, but in a way that is different from God's history with Israel and God's presence in Jesus, but at the same time related to both in such a way that this difference is part of God's being from eternity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is to be understood as the way in which the Christian church could make sense of her experience of God. It is the way in which the church could express in doctrinal form what shaped her experience of God and her worship. In the early church, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a problem that somehow arose from the encounter with Hellenistic philosophy. It is a solution to the problem of how one should express the genuine Christian experience of God by discourse about the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. In this way it becomes the criterion of what one should regard as genuinely Christian in all discourse about God and in relating to God. The doctrine of the Trinity allows Christians to explain what it means when they respond to the question "Who is God?" by professing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Trinitarian theology is therefore a way of doing theology that consistently pays attention to the triune identity of God in every aspect of Christian teaching, Christian worship, and Christian living.

Starting with the question "Who is God?" is a common feature among many, otherwise rather diverse, approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity in modern trinitarian theology. Karl Barth had already indicated that the priority of the question "Who?" points to the distinguishing feature of the doctrine of the Trinity as that which discloses the particular Christian character of the doctrine of God.[18] Robert Jenson has programmatically presented his doctrine of God as a treatise on the *triune identity*.[19] And John Zizioulas develops his approach by unfolding an "ontology of Personhood" starting with the "Who?"

18. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 297–305.

19. Robert W. Jenson, "The Triune God," in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 79–193.

question.[20] This has a number of important implications. Rather than starting with the question "What is God?" and all the qualifications of an epistemological and ontological kind that are necessary in order to deal with that question, the "Who?" question leads immediately to the issue of God's identification and identity. This can take the form of establishing the doctrine of the Trinity as the systematic link between the doctrine of revelation and the doctrine of God (Barth), of developing the link from the identification of God to the temporal structure of the church's experience of God (Jenson), or of systematically presenting an ontology of personhood that gives full weight to the significance of personal particularity (Zizioulas). In all the different cases it assumes that for the practices of the church's proclamation of the triune God and for addressing God in worship, the question of God's identity must take priority. The "What?" question is in this way dealt with in a specific form: "What" can be said about the essence of the God whose identity is expressed by invoking the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit? This, however, requires that one can say something about the way in which the triune God relates to creation on the basis of the relationship that God is as Father, Son, and Spirit.

However, this does not mean to identify God's self-identification with God's identity *simpliciter*. There is a sense in which God remains transcendent to God's self-identification in history. This is precisely the element of the "self" in God's self-identification. God is who God is in how God relates to creation, but how God relates to creation in time is eternally rooted in how God is in the immanent relations of the eternal Trinity. God's self-identification is the self-manifestation of God as God is constituted in the eternal Trinity. This is what radically distinguishes God from everything that is not God and which can only be expressed by discourse about God's freedom. Only if God freely relates to the world is it excluded that God is somehow constituted by God's relations to the world, which would deny the gratuitous freedom in which God creates *ex nihilo*. This can only be expressed by relating the "Who?" question more precisely to "How?" questions of how God is in relation to the world and how God is the eternal relations of the three persons in the one divine essence.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the attempt at providing a doctrinal answer to the question "How is God?" in relation to the being of the world and in relation to God's own being.

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20. See John Zizioulas, "On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood," in Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton, eds., *Persons, Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 33–46.

In Christian confessions of faith, the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is confessed as the creator, reconciler, and consummator of the world, that is, of everything that is not God. It is the one God, whose identity is expressed in the triune name, who is believed to be the origin, end, and meaning of everything there is. Already in the New Testament we find the beginnings of the attempt to state clearly that the creator of the world and the reconciler of the world is the one God, by talking about the mediation of creation in Christ (Col. 1:15–20). This gained an enormous significance over against all Gnostic tendencies to separate the imperfect creator of an imperfect creation from the redeemer who liberates from the imperfections of the created order. If one follows this line of thought through its different stages in the early debates on the Christian understanding of God, one arrives at the view that everything in the divine economy must be understood as a triune act. This has two implications. First, no act in the divine economy is to be ascribed to the Father, the Son, or the Spirit alone. Rather, the Trinity is the agent of all God's acts in the divine economy. The way in which the Father, Son, and Spirit are involved in this trinitarian action is not identical. The Son becomes incarnate, but not the Father or the Spirit, although the Father and Spirit are involved in the act of the incarnation of the Son. Every act of God in the divine economy appears as a unitary, but internally differentiated, act.

The second implication of that view is that the different acts of God in relation to the world are related through their one triune agent. Understanding this agent as triune as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit points from the start to the interconnectedness of divine action in the divine economy, and so to the trinitarian "dimensionality" in everything that God does. Creation in this way is not just the bringing into existence of something that did not exist before. It is much more than that, because it is the realization of God's will to be in communion with what God creates and so points to its future fulfillment. Viewed from a trinitarian perspective, creation has its purpose and its end in God's fully actualized communion with what God is not. Reconciliation is therefore, in one important respect, God's way of being faithful to God's original decision to be in communion with God's creation, in spite of the rebellion of human creatures against their creator. Interpreting the God who acts in the divine economy consistently as the triune God is therefore a way of expressing the unity of the divine economy while allowing for the differences and relations involved at different stages of the divine economy. The notion of a history of salvation which includes the dramatic events that the biblical story narrates, appears in this way as dependent on the notion of the triune God

as the agent of this history, who gives this history, in spite of all its narrative differentiations, its unity and plot.

Yet, this is not the whole story or, rather, the story of God's ways with the world is not all that needs to be said. This way of explaining trinitarian discourse about God can demonstrate that the divine economy has its origin and end, its unity and its dramatic differentiation, in the identity of the triune God. As such, it shows how trinitarian discourse structures the way the story is told and gives a particular matrix to Christian beliefs about God's relationship to the world. However, it has one difficulty. Is God how God is because of God's relationship to the world as creator, reconciler, and consummator of everything that is not God? If that were the case, then God and the world would be mutually constitutive. The whole thrust of the early development of Christian doctrine goes against such a conclusion, and in this way maintains one of the most decisive insights of the faith of Israel. God is not dependent on the world as the world is dependent on God. God is the sovereign Lord over all, and therefore "how God is" cannot be defined in an exclusive sense by God's relationship to the world. It must be defined by how God is in the relations of Father, Son, and Spirit. The development of the doctrine of creation from nothing, which intends to explain the sovereign freedom of God in creating the world, and the differentiation of the way "how" God is in the Trinity (that is, in the immanent relations) from the relations of the triune God to what is not God (in the economic relations) belong together. This explains why the creation of the world and the generation of the Son are so emphatically distinguished.

Negatively, this implies that we cannot simply "read off" the inner constitution of the trinitarian being of God from the way the triune God acts in the divine economy. Positively, this implies that the divine economy must be interpreted as the *self-manifestation* of the triunity of God. There remains a difference that maintains the distinction between epistemology and ontology, between believing and the beatific vision, between the *lumen gratiae* that illumines our faith and the *lumen gloriae* that will disclose the fullness of the glory of the triune God in communion with God's reconciled creation. There is, therefore, space for a qualified apophaticism at this point. It points to the way in which the triune God himself must bridge, and has bridged, the gap that must be maintained at this point.

Far from weakening the link between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, however, acknowledging this distinction strengthens that link. If God and the world cannot be seen as mutually constitutive, and if therefore the world must be seen as God's free creation *ex nihilo*, without any preconditions, and if this structure is maintained in every aspect of God's

relating to what is not God, then God's relationship to the world is based on God's freedom in a radical sense. There is then no prior metaphysical link between God and the world. That God creates by the Word has often been seen as an expression of God's freedom in creation by distinguishing creation by the Word of God sharply from any form of emanation from the divine. Everything that God does in the world is thus an expression of divine freedom. The divine economy is therefore in a specific sense the free self-manifestation of the triune God. How God is in relation to the world is a manifestation of God's self-determination. Everything that occurs in the world, including the created self-determination of human persons, is therefore to be seen in the horizon of God's self-determination. This includes God's self-determination to let God's self-determination be shaped by the different states of the world, the freedom to let God's self-determination be determined by what happens in the world.

Now, if *how* God relates to the world is determined not only by the freedom of God's will, which remains external to God's being, but by the freedom of *how* God *is* in the Trinity, this will change the view of the relationship between the divine economy and the immanent Trinity. If God's freedom to relate to what is not God is related to the freedom-in-relationship that God is in God's being, this excludes that God's will could be arbitrary and locates God's will in the freedom that God *is*. If the Word through which God relates to the world is rooted in the Word that "was in the beginning, and was with God, and . . . was God" (John 1:1), the response to the Word of God in faith cannot only be a response to God's will but involves a relationship to God as God is in God's being. We have in this way a strong "relational joint" between how God is in relation to the world and how God is in the inner relations.

This, however, involves choices in the interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity. If the *homoousios* is simply taken to mean that Father, Son, and Spirit instantiate the same divine essence three times over, without rooting how God is in relation to the world in how God is in God's own being, one has effectively made the doctrine of the Trinity meaningless for understanding the divine economy. If one takes the *homoousios to patri* of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed seriously, one will have a view of the Trinity where the *homoousios* is understood in such a way as to make the eternal relations between the persons of the Trinity meaningful for the divine economy. God's freedom is then not to be understood as the freedom of an abstract substance or of an absolute subject, three times over in the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, but as freedom-in-relationship, as freedom-in-communion, which liberates human persons to be free in relationship to the triune God who is freedom. This seems to be

crucial for understanding God as love, as the Christian tradition has consistently emphasized on the basis of 1 John 4. It seems that not only the Cappadocians, but also Augustine and the majority of the Western theologians of the Trinity, have in their different reconstructions of the doctrine maintained that how God is in God's own being is relevant to the way in which God is in relation to the being of the world.

Starting from the "Who?" question in trinitarian theology inevitably involves the theologian in the discussion of the "How?" questions, both with regard to the relation of the triune God to creation and with regard to the relations in the divine being itself. It is therefore not surprising that many recent approaches to trinitarian theology have given the question of relation a high priority. It is one of the most significant discoveries of the classical disputes of trinitarian doctrine in the early church that the straightforward application of a received philosophical conceptuality to the doctrine of God leads into difficulties. If the three in God are understood in the sense of three substances sharing one attribute, namely divinity, we are in a tritheistic scheme that can neither do justice to the emphasis on the oneness and uniqueness of God, which Christianity inherited from the Hebrew Scriptures, nor can it distinguish the Christian understanding of God sufficiently from pagan forms of religiosity in its cultural contexts. When only one of the three in the divine Trinity has the divine substance in the full sense and the other two in a lesser sense, it might seem at first that the requirement of the unique transcendence of God can be met, but at the expense of having two demigods, all too familiar in the religious world of the Mediterranean in late antiquity. The astonishing demythologizing effect that Nicaea had by claiming that the Son of God was both fully human and fully divine would have been lost. The alternative of speaking of one divine substance and three modes of appearance, the modalist proposal, denies the eternity of the three in God and turns the conversation and interaction between the three—so central to the New Testament witness—into a charade.

Even such a simplified picture of some of the problems confronting trinitarian reflection can quickly demonstrate that trinitarian theology must in some sense engage in revisionary metaphysics and that for this kind of metaphysics the category of relation has paramount importance. After all, the classical terminology of "unbegotten," "begotten," and "proceeds" clearly names relations. But what kind of relations? Here the thrust of the distinction and connection of the two "how" questions points in one direction. While there are in the triune God real relations—that is, relations that are constitutive for the particular being of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—these relations must be clearly distinguished from the relations of the triune God to what is

not God. The inner-trinitarian relations are in a sense mutually constitutive and reciprocal, though asymmetrical, relations. These inner-trinitarian relations constitute the respective trinitarian identities (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), and in this way constitute a real otherness; they also constitute, because they are constitutive relations, a real togetherness. This togetherness is further expressed by the fact that the relations which are constitutive for the hypostatic identities do not constitute a division in the divine essence. They are relations and distinctions in God, but do not involve any division or separation of the divine essence. The relations of the Trinity to the world are constitutive for the being of the world but not for the being of God. However, when this relational God relates to what is not God in creation, reconciliation, and eschatological consummation, God relates in such a way that God creates a relational world, a world of created particularities and created forms of togetherness.

What has been achieved by highlighting the importance of the "How?" question in both its forms, with regard to the being of the triune God, and with regard to the relation of the triune God to creation? The upshot can be summarized in five statements:

1. The category of relation as a real, reciprocal, constitutive, though asymmetrical, relation has been given a proper place in the understanding of the Trinity, both and at the same time for the understanding of the hypostatic identities of Father, Son, and Spirit and for the view of their togetherness.

2. If God is relational in this sense, there is eternally a place for personal particularity in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which does not cancel out God's essential unity.

3. If God is relational in this sense, if this relationality is the "how" of the being of God, then this inner-trinitarian relationality must be sharply distinguished from God's relations *ad extra*. The relations of the trinitarian God to everything that is not God are constitutive for creation, but they are nonconstitutive for God.

4. However, if this relational God relates to what is not God, the divine relationality will shape that to which God relates so that when this God creates, there is a relational world with its own created relationality and its created patterns of particularity and togetherness. On the one hand, the network of created relationality of a contingent world is more diverse than the relationality of the triune

God, because it is not encompassed by the unity of the divine essence but characterized by the plurality of created substances. However, since it is created relationality, it is an open relationality that cannot sufficiently and completely be understood apart from its constitution in the relationship of God to creation.

5. Every attempt at expressing the correlation between the two "Hows?" must take their distinction and relationship into account. It is here that the relationship between kataphatic and apophatic modes of thought and speech must be worked through again and again.

It is precisely at this point that the third thesis must be considered:

The doctrine of the Trinity tries to answer the question "What is God?" in such a way that the answer neither cancels the relational plurality in God nor the unity of God's being but specifies the ways in which they can be spoken of.

It must be conceded that this question has to be in the background of reflections on the "Who?" and "How?" questions from the beginning. After all, we are considering the identity of God and the how of God's internal and external relations. The "monotheistic principle" that Christianity inherited from the Old Testament, and which Christian theology never questioned until quite recently, was presupposed and referred to in the development of discourse relating God, Jesus, and the Spirit from the beginning.[21] It acquired a specific significance in the development of trinitarian doctrine over against two positions that programmatically made appeal to it: Arianism and modalism.[22] What had to be shown was that the procession of the Son and the proceeding of the Spirit do not disrupt the unity of the one divine nature. The breakthrough for a clear conceptual formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity was certainly the distinction between what is common (*koinon*) to the three persons in the Trinity and what is characteristic for each one of them (*idion*).[23] The identification of the "what" with the shared *ousia* and the explication of Father, Son, and Spirit in the "how" of their relations with the particular *hypostaseis* that thus acquired a new meaning, generated a trinitarian ontology focused

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21. See my article "Monotheismus V. Systematisch-theologisch," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin-New York: W. de Gruyter, 1993), 23:256–62.

22. It is interesting to note that these two heresies were employed in medieval theology as paradigms for setting up the coordinates of the trinitarian question. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 27, a.1.

23. E.g., Basil, *Contra Eunom.* 2,28; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 25,16.

on the modes of origination (*tropos hyparxeos*),[24] the resulting relations (strictly interpreted as correlations, the "towardness" of the *hypostaseis* expressed by their identification with the *prosopa*), and the character of the resulting relation as *koinonia*, as communion relation or persons in communion.[25]

These differentiations, allowing for particularity, alterity, and relatedness, however, had to be bracketed by the one undivided, eternal *ousia*, excluding any ontological comparative and gradation. This formed the foundation of a rule of predication that could specify what had to be said of the one *ousia* and what could be predicated of the different persons. This rule of predication restricts all discourse of the "what" of God to the negation of specifying limitations. There is no positive content that can be predicated of the divine *ousia*; it remains beyond human grasp. "We have learned to honor in silence that which transcends speech and thought," insists Gregory of Nyssa.[26] However, this is not simply a case of "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."[27] Rather, this is a silence that speaks, insofar as it directs our attention from the *ousia* to the *energeiai* of the triune God. The "unnameable" essence can be indirectly named by referring to the *energeia* of God, God's actions in the divine economy. Because they are rooted in the one *ousia*, the common *energeiai* are always the joint action of the three persons. Although what can be said directly about the divine *ousia* is that it remains incomprehensible and unnameable, indirectly it is needed to keep trinitarianism from falling into the ever-present pitfalls of Eunomianism or modalism. The apophatic restriction concerning the *ousia* regulates the kataphatic expression of language about the trinitarian God when it turns to the *energeia* of the Trinity.

We can thus summarize what needs to be said about the question "What is God?" in the Trinity:

> 1. Speaking of the divine essence as that which is common in the strong sense of the *homoousios* of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit excludes both any form of ontological gradation between the three persons of the Trinity and any ontological difference between "what" the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are in relation to "what" God is. The denial of a difference of the ontological "what"-status of

24. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 31.9.

25. Gregory of Nyssa, *Pet.* 4 (= Basil, *Ep.* 38,4).

26. *Contra Eunom.* 3,5.

27. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 7.

the three persons in the Trinity shows that their difference consists in the "how"-relationship.

2. The divine persons do not possess their common divine *ousia* in any other way than by virtue of their relations. Any other assumption would posit the divine essence as a fourth element in the Trinity, and necessitate speaking of relations that the persons have to the divine *ousia* in addition to the relations they have to one another. This implies, on the one hand—and this is one of the hallmarks of trinitarian orthodoxy—that the divine *ousia* is not understood as generative and that no form of fecundity is ascribed to the divine *ousia*. If, on the other hand, the originating relations between the three persons are the only way in which they possess the divine *ousia*, then *communication* is constitutive for the being and for the unity of the divine *ousia*. The three persons are "what" they are in virtue of their relations to one another, in virtue of "how" they are related in the communicative relations of origin.

3. Speaking of the one divine *ousia* of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit contrasts the divine essence to all forms of created substances. While created substances are always conditioned in some way in their "what"-ness by their relationship to something else, this is not the case for God. The conditionality of created substances implies necessity, whereas the unity of the divine essence is beyond all necessity. Only if the relations between the three persons are placed squarely within the unity of the divine essence can they be understood as relations of divine freedom. The relations of origin that apply to the three persons are therefore relations of absolute freedom-in-relation. The *homoousios to patri* which is predicated of the Son excludes any notion of the Father as "cause" (*aition*) that somehow restricts the freedom of the Son and, consequently, of the Spirit. The order between the three divine persons (*taxis*) is therefore the structure of coessential divine freedom, shared by all three in virtue of their common essence.

4. The divine essence can therefore only be spoken of in a sense that denies any form of restriction, limitation, or dependence that would restrict the freedom that God is in all three persons.

5. Speaking of the one divine essence therefore means speaking of the three divine persons and *vice versa.*

6. Being in relation with the trinitarian God means for God's human creatures to be in relation to the ground of freedom.

On the basis of the answers that are given to the questions "Who?," "How?," and "What?" is God, one can then proceed to speak of the attributes of God. This brings us to our fourth thesis:

The doctrine of the Trinity responds to the question "Which attributes can be predicated of God?" by regulating the way in which we can predicate attributes of God and points to the way in which these attributes are related.

When we develop the doctrine of the Trinity from the perspective of the "Who?" question, starting with the triune identity of God, then discourse about God's attributes must first of all be rooted in the personal self-communication and self-manifestation of God. God's self-communication is the foundation of Christian worship in which God is addressed by God's threefold divine name and the attributes of God are expressed in the form of the address to God in prayer. Thereby, the discourse about the divine attributes is placed within the relationship to the triune God as it is enabled by God's relationship to us and as it is enacted in worship. God and God's attributes are not spoken of as something external to who we are in relation to God. The situation of worship expresses explicitly that in predicating God we are implicitly predicating ourselves, and in predicating ourselves we are implicitly predicating God. For the Christian faith, the biblical Scriptures have paradigmatic function in exercising the predication of attributes to God in the relational context of worship. In this context, the personal attributes of God always come first, and they are connected to the original "scenes" of God's self-disclosure in God's word and actions as they are related in the biblical witnesses. The different personal attributes of God situate the worshiping community in relation to God so that predicating God is part of praising God, of petitioning God, of thanking God, of voicing our lament to God. Connecting the attributes of God to God's self-manifestation is intended to make sure that we are addressing and predicating God as God wishes to be addressed and allows us to predicate God.

It is important to note that this contextualization also includes the "names" of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. When we address God as Father, we follow the invitation of Jesus: "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven . . ." (Matt. 6:9). When we talk about Jesus as the Son, we do so in the context of

the application of Psalm 2:7 in the accounts of Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the beloved" (Matt. 3:17). When we call on the Spirit, we do so in the context of Jesus' announcement of the coming of the Spirit: "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything" (John 14:26). The biblical accounts establish rigid designations, which are prior to descriptive naming, and establish the context in which descriptions are used. In other words: that Jesus called God "Father" and invites us to do so is prior to analogies between human fatherhood and the name "Father" for the one in the Trinity who is unbegotten, and defines the framework in which such analogous descriptions can secondarily be applied.[28]

Placing the question of the attributes of God in the context of worship establishes a strong link between the address of God and the predication of God. "Which attributes" can be predicated of God depends on who God is. In addressing God in this way, we are, in a sense, retracing in our relating to God the steps that the triune God has taken to relate to us in God's trinitarian self-disclosure. This is expressed clearly by Luther in his Large Catechism: "For we could never attain to the knowledge of the grace and favor of the Father except through the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the paternal heart, outside of whom we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But of Christ we could know nothing either, unless it had been revealed by the Holy Ghost."[29] Here we are already at the point where the "Who?" and the "How?" questions are interconnected. Predicating personal attributes of God necessarily involves us in the way God manifests Godself in the divine economy. This implies that the attributes predicated of God are based on God's self-manifestation in the divine economy.

At the same time, the attributes of God receive an important qualification here. In the context of the divine economy, the divine attributes are based on what God has done, does, and promises to do in the creation, reconciliation, and consummation of the world. In this connection, traditional attributes such as divine omnipotence are not defined primarily by what can be predicated of God—that is, that God can do anything that is logically possible—but by the creation of a world, the resurrection of Christ, or the justification of the sinner. What God's actions in the divine economy have in common is that they are truly creative in the sense that they are not restricted by any conditions

28. Cf. the causal theory of names that Saul Kripke suggests as an alternative to the descriptivist account of naming, in his *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980). We have treated both accounts as complementary, while giving priority to the causal account.

29. "The Apostles' Creed," in Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2008), 62.

external to God's agency and they do not rely on presuppositions other than the being and will of God. This is most clearly seen in the understanding of the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, which does not presuppose anything apart from God's power to create. Christ's resurrection points in a similar direction. The end scenarios of created existence, finitude, and death have no determinative force that restricts the power of God. God is the Lord over life and death who transcends the polarities of created life. Similarly, the justification of the sinner does not presuppose merit on the part of the sinner, but makes the sinner righteous in virtue of Christ's righteousness. That God's agency does not have any presuppositions external to God does not mean that God cannot take the state of God's creation, death, and sin as the occasion for God's actions. God responds to the misery of creation, but God responds in the glory of God's own being. There is then a categorical difference between divine agency and any form of created agency, which in a material sense defines God's omnipotence.

One implication of divine omnipotence, as it is understood on the basis of God's self-manifestation in the divine economy, is that because of its creative character there is nothing that could frustrate or ultimately impede God's achieving the goal that God has set Godself. In this sense, God has foreknowledge of God's aim for God's relationship with creation, perfecting God's communion with God's reconciled creation, and is in this sense omniscient. God is omnipresent to every moment of the life of creation because God is the condition for its presence at every moment. And God's life brackets the time of creation from beginning to end.

If one takes the way the trinitarian God relates to that which is not God as the basis for defining the attributes of God, one can detect a trinitarian structure to how God acts in the divine economy which in turn shapes the view of God's attributes. If God's agency is understood as trinitarian agency, it has a trinitarian structure in the unity of the agency of the triune God. Basil has expressed this structure by talking about the Father as the unoriginate originating cause, the Son as the ordering cause, and the Spirit as the perfecting cause in everything that God does.[30] This leads to a trinitarian differentiation of all divine attributes which transcends the logic of negation that is based on the contrast between the Creator and the creation.

This can easily be shown with reference to divine eternity. As the unoriginate originating cause, God is the creative ground of all created time, and God as the creator is atemporally eternally present to every creature at every point in time of creation. If creation is to be understood as the actualization of

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30. Basil, *De spir*. 15,38.

God's eternal will to be in communion with God's creation, then God must also be thought of as temporally eternally present for every creature and with every creature at every point in time of creation. God's temporality in this sense is God's free and eternal self-determination for communion with God's creatures.

The purpose of God's eternal creative will and temporal creative presence is disclosed in the incarnation of God the Son in Jesus Christ. As the eschatological event in time, it is both the fulfillment of the preceding history, and the anticipation of the perfection of God's communion with God's creation. In this way, Jesus Christ is the temporal self-disclosure of the eternal will of God to establish a communion of love and righteousness with God's creation. This illumines the purpose of creation by promising the perfection of creation in communion with God. God's temporal human creatures are thereby directed to the purpose of God's will and so to the ultimate destiny of their created life. The death and resurrection of Christ is therefore the paradigmatic reconciliation of time and eternity, of the time of mortal creatures and their eternal destiny. This has decisive implications for our view of the time of creation. In its exposition to death, in its bondage to decay, creation is destined to being transformed in participation in the communion with the eternal God.

The presence of God's Spirit in creation has a twofold significance. On the one hand, it is the presence of the eternal God in all forms of created life as the Spirit of life that makes creation responsive to the creative action of the Creator. On the other hand, the Spirit as the perfecting cause is the presence of the future perfection for creation. In God's Spirit, God is the future of every moment of creation. As such, the Spirit liberates from the bondage of creation to the past. As the presence of the absolute future, it counteracts the conditioning of created existence from the past, from its antecedent conditions. The Spirit is in this way the source of freedom for the creature, the way in which the eternal perfection in God's perfected communion with God's reconciled creation is already present here and now. Phenomena like emergence, which are not the predicted result of their antecedent conditions according to deterministic laws, appear in this way as the correlate of the presence of the Spirit in the natural world. The Spirit's time is the actualization of novelty already before the end of history. However, the liberating Spirit may establish discontinuity with antecedent courses of events, but as the perfecting cause of God's action it is not discontinuous with God's action as the originating cause and the ordering cause. What may appear as discontinuous novelty on the plane of worldly events must nevertheless be continuous with God's overarching will and action and the patterns of the eternal and the temporal in which it is actualized.

Talking about the eternity of God on this trinitarian basis has a rich content, which is not expressed by interpreting eternity simply as timelessness. Talk about God's eternity must comprise the forms in which God is present to creation as its eternal ground, eternally and temporally, in the *chronos* of physical time, in the *kairos* of the reconciliation of time and eternity, and in the *eschaton* where time is taken up into the eternal presence of God. God's eternity is the unity of the eternal relation of God the eternal Father, as the unoriginate origin, to a temporal creation, of the ordering of times through the presence of the eternal Son for time and in time, and of the life-giving and life-perfecting temporal presence of the eternal Spirit. And in this rich sense God's eternity is, as Boethius defined, "the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life."[31]

Boethius's definition gives a good indication of how divine simplicity—the doctrine that there is no real distinction between God and God's attributes, so that God is what God has—should be understood: God is God's nature and God's existence. Divine simplicity denies God that is a composite being characterized by such kinds of composition as form and matter, individual and nature, essence and being, and substance and accident. None of these distinctions may be applied to God and God's attributes. In philosophical discussion, it is questioned whether this doctrine does make any sense at all. Alvin Plantinga has famously argued that if God is identical to God's properties, then God is a property. However, properties are abstract entities, and abstract entities are causally inert, so that God cannot be conceived as a personal creator of every contingent being.[32] This objection is based on a distinction between concrete individuals as active, and abstract properties as inert. One can see, from this objection alone, that divine simplicity requires to be supplemented in order to exclude this kind of straightforward objection. That God is simple is simply not enough, because particular things might be simple, too, in the sense of indivisibility. On the other hand, if God is *simplicitas* "*simpliciter*," it becomes difficult to distinguish God from the formal being of things as that which appears when a composed reality is reduced to its most elementary principle. Simplicity either claims not enough by making God a being among other beings, or it claims too much by identifying God with being as such, with all its pantheistic consequences.

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31. Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae* V,6,4: "interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio." For a slightly more detailed account, see Christoph Schwöbel, "Time," in *Religion Past and Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 12:720–24.

32. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 47.

Thomas Aquinas, who structures the *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) in such a way that the doctrine of the Trinity (*ST* I, qq. 27-43) is the core from which the procession of creatures from God (*ST* I, qq. 44-119) is to be explained, therefore prefaces this account with a reflection on the divine essence (*ST* I, qq. 2-26), including their modes of operation (*agere sequitur esse*), in order to clarify the distinctions of the persons by means of active processions (cf. *ST* 2 prol.). In this account of the attributes that make up the divine essence, divine simplicity comes first in order to clarify that God's essence is indivisible, so that we cannot know God through God's parts, which is, of course, the way in which we know created entities. If we cannot know God from God's parts, it is not only clear from the start that the three persons cannot be conceived of as parts of God, but also that we cannot know God from the rational investigation of things as they are caused by God. In the end, we arrive at positive knowledge of God only by means of revelation. The reflections of the first section of the threefold division of the *prima pars* lead into the doctrine of the Trinity as it is revealed to faith. Simplicity provides the starting point, but nothing more. Simplicity (q. 3) must be supplemented by perfection (q. 4)—after all, a particular being could be simple and God could simply be being. *Perfectio* therefore presents God as the *ipsum esse*, as the cause of all things, clearly distinguished from its effects, but in a fully determinate and concrete form (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*). Only God, as the perfect being, can be perfectly simple, so that now God's goodness (qq. 5 and 6) and infinity (q. 7) can be considered, leading to omnipresence (q. 8), immutability (q. 9), and eternity (q. 10), culminating in divine unity (q.11).[33] This is the point where all the arguments lead, so that divine unity is, so to speak, the telos of the argument, starting from simplicity. One could say: divine simplicity is *indivisibilis essentiae tota simul et perfecta possessio in tribus personis Trinitatis*. In other words, Thomas designs the exposition of the understanding of the divine essence and its attributes in such a way that he arrives at the first foundational concept of his doctrine of the Trinity, the *mia ousia*. In this connection, divine simplicity makes perfect sense because of the conjunction with divine perfection. However, from being a knock-out argument against

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33. See the excellent account offered by Rudi te Velde, whose particular strength is that he considers in each step Thomas takes in his argument the structure of the whole *prima pars*: *Aquinas on God: The "Divine Science" of the* Summa Theologiae (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006). Te Velde's contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery, O.P., and Matthew Levering, on "The Divine Person(s): Trinity, Person, and Analogous Naming" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 359–70, can be read as following *Aquinas on God*.

trinitarian relatedness, it has become an element in defining divine unity in the sense of the *mia ousia*. Whatever can be said about the three persons, it must not break this divine unity, because otherwise we would no longer be talking about divine persons. We would—at least on Thomas's account—no longer be doing trinitarian theology.

Doing Trinitarian Theology

If one surveys the developments in the field of trinitarian theology in the last twenty years, one has the impression of a lively flourishing of approaches and investigations focused on the doctrine of the Trinity, its foundations, developments, and constructive expositions in all theological disciplines. Two weighty handbooks on the Trinity have been published in recent years, attempting to give a comprehensive picture of the sources and debates that have characterized the development of trinitarian thought in the history of Christianity.[34] Peter C. Phan, the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, lists in his introduction around twenty new collaborative volumes in recent years that attempt to assess trinitarian teaching and its implications.[35] One of the most recent of these collections offers a comprehensive overview under the title *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology*, combining historical studies and constructive approaches and their critique.[36] It would be difficult to point to any other theological topic that has attracted so much scholarly attention in recent decades. Interest in trinitarian theology is truly ecumenical, in that it unites the different churches, denominations, and theological traditions, and it is truly interdisciplinary, bringing the different theological fields together in theological and, increasingly, philosophical conversations. The rapidly intensifying encounter between the religions in a globalizing world has also led to a new interest in the doctrine of the Trinity as that which is perceived by other religions as distinctively and problematically Christian. When in the 1970s a series of theological books was launched for a wider readership with the series title *Themen der Theologie* ("Topics of Theology"), the volume *Gott* (1971), written by Heinrich Ott, Karl Barth's successor as the chair of dogmatics in Basel, only mentioned the Trinity in passing. When a different publisher launched a new series with the same title in 2011, the volume had the title

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34. Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Emery and Levering, eds., *Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*.

35. Peter C. Phan, "Systematic Issues in Trinitarian Theology," *Cambridge Companion*, 25–26n.1.

36. Robert J. Woźniak and Giulio Maspero, eds., *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2012).