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# Tracking the Trinity in Contemporary Theology

John T. Pless

“The dogma has more than once been thrown to the scrap heap, but has proved to be more lasting than many of the alternatives.”<sup>1</sup> Or, at least, so thought Gerhard Sauter regarding the Trinity. Without doubt the doctrine of the Trinity has emerged as a central issue in current theological inquiry. A quick perusal of theological journals published in the last twenty-five years yields dozens of articles on some aspect of trinitarian theology. Since 1982, *Word & World* has devoted two complete issues to the Trinity. This is not atypical when compared to other periodicals. A relatively new journal, *Pro Ecclesia*, founded by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, has become a primary outlet for trinitarian studies utilizing both patristic and ecumenical scholarship. A host of recent books have taken up one aspect or another of the doctrine of the Trinity. In March 2003 the teaching theologians of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod gathered in Dallas for a convocation that had as its theme “Confessing the Trinity Today.” Not only systematic theology, but also biblical studies, liturgics, ethics, missiology, and pastoral theology have felt, in one way or another, the influence of contemporary trinitarian studies.

## I. Bearings from Barth

Whence comes this resurgence of trinitarian theology, and where is it going? While the Reformation witnessed a rise of anti-trinitarian figures such as Faustus Socinus and Michael Servetus, the major attack on this doctrine would occur with the advent of a historical-critical approach to the New Testament in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Sauter, *Gateways to Dogmatics: Reasoning Theologically for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 39. Two significant books appeared after this paper was completed that should be noted. First, there is Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). Grenz does an admirable job of surveying twentieth-century theologians who have worked on the doctrine of the Trinity. Also worthy of note are several essays (especially those by Jenson, Schwöbel, Gregersen, and Saarinen) in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

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fourth Gospel was reckoned ahistorical (J. G. Herder, D. F. Strauss, and F. C. Baur), fundamental doubts regarding the biblical authenticity of the Trinity likewise began to surface.<sup>2</sup> The dogmatic response to the findings of these exegetes comes in Frederick Schleiermacher's relocation of the doctrine to the appendix of his systematic theology, *The Christian Faith*. Convinced that the doctrine was unnecessary for "Christian self-consciousness," Schleiermacher dismissed the ecclesiastical confession of the Trinity in favor of a God "unconditioned and absolutely simple."

We have only to do with the God-consciousness given in our self-consciousness along with our consciousness of the world; hence we have no formula for the being of God in the world, and should have to borrow such a formula from speculation, and so prove ourselves disloyal to the character of the discipline with which we are working.<sup>3</sup>

At best, Schleiermacher could see the doctrine of the Trinity only in Sabellian-like terms, which hold the persons of the Godhead as operating in respect to various modes in the world. Schleiermacher's assessment of the doctrine of the Trinity would dominate the nineteenth century as it was congenial to the themes of divine simplicity and human morality.

Karl Barth's (1886–1968) articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity stands in sharp contrast to Schleiermacher's revisionism. Rescuing the Trinity from Schleiermacher's doctrinal attic, Barth sets the doctrine in the prolegomena of his dogmatics. Far from being a theological afterthought, the doctrine of the Trinity, according to Barth, has both a positive and critical function in Christian theology. The root of the Trinity for Barth is in the fact that God reveals himself as Lord. Thus Barth begins his dogmatic treatment of the Trinity by asserting: "God's Word is God Himself in His revelation. For God reveals Himself as the Lord and according to the Scripture this signifies for the concept of revelation that God Himself in unimpaired unity yet also in unimpaired distinction is Revealer,

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<sup>2</sup> Overviews of the place of the doctrine of the Trinity in nineteenth-century theology can be found in E. J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 250–259; S. M. Powell, *The Trinity in German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104–141; and Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 3–41.

<sup>3</sup> Friederich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, tr. D. M. Baillie et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 748.

Revelation, and Revealedness.”<sup>4</sup> Positive assertions can be made only because God has revealed himself as the triune Lord. This revelation, for Barth, is God’s own interpretation of himself. Critically, the trinitarian doctrine serves to keep all language about God monotheistic. That is to say, the doctrine of the Trinity prevents man from understanding the being of God as a human construction, which is idolatry.

Barth reclaims and employs traditional trinitarian terminology. God’s being *ad extra* corresponds to his being *ad intra*. God does not become an economy that is alien to his essence. Dogmatics, argues Barth, must guard against both modalism and subordinationism. To speak of three personalities in God “would be the worst and most pointed expression of tritheism.”<sup>5</sup>

Eberhard Jüngel, one of the most perceptive interpreters of Barth, observes: “The *Church Dogmatics* is the ingenious and diligent attempt to think the proposition ‘God corresponds to himself’ through to the end.”<sup>6</sup> Barth seeks to speak of God as he is in himself. Therefore Barth does not begin with an abstract definition of the deity but with God’s fundamental revelation of himself in Christ. Consistent with Barth’s rejection of any natural theology is his dismissal of all moves to find analogies to the Trinity (*vestigium trinitatis*) in nature, history, or psychology. Simply put, for Barth all speaking about God must be trinitarian if it is to be Christian.

Nevertheless, old habits die slowly. It is not surprising that Barth’s reassertion of the Trinity was vigorously repudiated by the older liberalism, which, firmly entrenched in Harnack’s opinion, maintained that this doctrine represented the epitome of the Hellenization of the primitive kerygma. Accusing Barth of resurrecting supernatural metaphysics and engaging in unwarranted speculation, Wilhem Pauck impatiently dismissed Barth’s trinitarian approach:

As if it were really a matter of life and death, that as members of the church of the Twentieth Century—we should accept the dogma of the Trinity! Professional theologians may think that it is absolutely necessary for us to be concerned with theological thought-forms of the past, but—God be thanked!—the common Christian layman is no

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I:1, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 295.

<sup>5</sup> Welch, *In This Name*, 187.

<sup>6</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God’s Being is in Becoming* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 24.

professional theologian, and he may be a better Christian for that reason . . . . What (the preacher) needs to know is who God is and how man can be put in right relation with him into the abundant, full, rich, meaningful life.<sup>7</sup>

The old liberalism represented by Pauck and the other heirs of Harnack was fading. Whatever else one may think of Karl Barth, it must be granted that he restored the topic of the Trinity to respectable theological discourse.

In the twentieth century, Karl Rahner (1904–1984) ranks second only to Karl Barth in the development of the new trinitarian theology. This Austrian-born Roman Catholic theologian attempted to connect the classical theology embodied in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas with the worldview created by the Enlightenment. Representative of the climate that was created by Vatican II, Rahner is perhaps best known for his definition of anonymous Christians. It is his trinitarian theology, however, that continues to engage current scholarship. Following in the path of Barth, Rahner also concludes that the word *person* is an unsatisfactory way of speaking of Father, Son, and Spirit as the term is freighted with individualistic definitions. Rahner, similar to Barth, argues that *hypostasis* be defined as “a distinct manner of subsisting.”

Rahner observed: “Despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists.’ We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”<sup>8</sup> In an effort to bring clarity to the use of the traditional trinitarian categories, Rahner asserted what would come to be known as Rahner’s Rule: “*The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.*”<sup>9</sup> Trinitarian theology for the

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Pauck, *Karl Barth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1931), 189–190.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Trinity,” in *A Map of Twentieth-Century Theology: Readings from Karl Barth to Radical Pluralism*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 190.

<sup>9</sup> Rahner, “The Trinity,” 195; emphasis original. On the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity in contemporary theology, see Fred Sanders, “Entangled in the Trinity: Economic and Immanent Trinity in Recent Theology” *Dialog* (Fall 2001): 175–182; Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 20–24; and David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas: The Doctrine of the Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33–65.

remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century is an engagement with or qualification of this axiom.

## II. Teutonic Terrain

Barth and Rahner set the stage for what is to follow. The most prolific and perhaps best known theologian in the generation after Barth and Rahner is Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–). While indebted to Barth's articulation of the necessity of revelation for theology, Pannenberg distinguishes himself from Barth in that he locates revelation in God's acts within history. Thus, for Pannenberg, theology begins from below in the arena of history but can only be apprehended eschatologically from its fulfillment in the reign of the resurrected Jesus. It is from this perspective that Pannenberg develops his doctrine of the Trinity.

Asserting that "one can know the intertrinitarian distinctions and relations, the inner life of God, only through the revelation of the God, not through the different spheres of the operation of the one God in the world," Pannenberg grounds his discussion of the Trinity in Jesus' relationship to the Father and the Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Here Pannenberg recognizes his distance from Barth as he observes that Barth does not develop the doctrine of the Trinity from the data of historical revelation of the three persons but "from the formal concept of revelation as self-revelation."<sup>11</sup> Rather, Pannenberg engages the biblical narrative that testifies to Jesus disclosing his relationship to the Father while also distinguishing himself from the Father. More specifically, the Trinity can be known only through the events of the cross and resurrection. Revealing that a Hegelian imprint remains on his trinitarian doctrine, Pannenberg writes:

Jesus is the Son of the eternal Father only in total to the will of the Father, a resignation which corresponded to the unconditionality of Jesus' historical sending and which, in view of the earthly wreck of that sending, had to become a complete abandonment of his self to the Father. Jesus' absolute practiced unity of will with the Father, as this was confirmed by God's raising him from the dead, is the medium of

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<sup>10</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology – Volume I*, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 273.

<sup>11</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology – Volume I*, 296.

his unity of essence with the Father and the basis for all assertions about Jesus' divine sonship.<sup>12</sup>

Pannenberg speaks of the relationships within the Trinity as reciprocity, acknowledging that the traditional dogmatic language of *perichoresis* and circumincession point to this reality but "had only a limited impact because of the one-sided viewing of the intratrinitarian relations as relations of origin."<sup>13</sup> There is, according to Pannenberg, not only a relationship of origin (e.g., the Father begets the Son and sends the Spirit), but there also exists a relationship of giving within the Trinity (e.g., the Son glorifies the Father and is filled with the Spirit). While there is reciprocity between the persons of the Trinity, the relations between the persons are irreversible. The Father in every respect is God of himself.

This view seems to rule out genuine mutuality in the relations of the trinitarian persons, since it has the order of origin running irreversibly from the Father to the Son and Spirit. Athanasius, however, argued forcibly against the Arians that the Father would not be the Father without the Son. Does that not mean that in some way the deity of the Father has to be dependent on the relation to the Son, although not in the same way as that of the Son is on the relation to the Father? The Father is not begotten of the Son or sent by him. These relations are irreversible. But in another way the relativity of fatherhood that finds expression in the designation 'Father' might well involve a dependence of the Father on the Son and thus be the basis of true reciprocity in the trinitarian relations.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to theories of abstract transcendence of God or notions of divine unity that leave no space for plurality, Pannenberg asserts: "Christian trinitarian belief is concerned only with the concrete and intrinsically differentiated life of the divine unity. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact concrete monotheism."<sup>15</sup>

Jürgen Moltmann (1926–), a contemporary of Pannenberg, also had studied at Göttingen under Hans Joachim Iwand, and the two were

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Robert Jenson, "Jesus in the Trinity: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Christology and the Doctrine of the Trinity," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. Carl Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988). Also see Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology—Volume I*, 308–319 and "Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine of God," *Dialog* 26 (Fall 1987): 250–257.

<sup>13</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology—Volume I*, 319.

<sup>14</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology—Volume I*, 311–312.

<sup>15</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology—Volume I*, 335.

colleagues for a time (1958–1961 at Wuppertal). Taking up the challenge of Schleiermacher that the doctrine of the Trinity is due for a complete overhaul, Moltmann sets about to achieve just this by finding “the relationship of God to God in the reality of the event of the cross.”<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Moltmann and Pannenberg share a similar approach, although Moltmann’s conclusions will prove to be far more radical than those of Pannenberg.

The death of Jesus, according to Moltmann, is a “trinitarian event” between God and God.

In the cross, Father and Son are most deeply separated in forsakenness and at the same time are most inwardly one in their surrender. What proceeds from this event between Father and Son is the Spirit which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive, since even the fact that they are dead cannot exclude them from this event of the cross; the death in God also includes them.<sup>17</sup>

Moltmann admits his indebtedness to Hegel at this point.

For Moltmann, the theology of the cross is the hermeneutical key that provides access to the mystery of the Trinity.

I myself have tried to think through the theology of the cross in trinitarian terms and to understand the doctrine of the Trinity in light of the theology of the cross. In order to grasp the death of the Son in its significance for God himself, I found myself bound to surrender the traditional distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity, according to which the cross comes to stand only in the economy of salvation, but not within the immanent Trinity.<sup>18</sup>

According to Moltmann, God relates to the world in such a way as to determine its fate, however history also affects God. In this relationship the three persons of the Trinity relate reciprocally, both to each other and to the world. In the Trinity, “the three Persons are equal; they live and are manifested in one another and through one another.”<sup>19</sup> God relates to the world as he acts within history, making his love operative in the suffering

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<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, tr. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 239.

<sup>17</sup> Moltman, *The Crucified God*, 244.

<sup>18</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, tr. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 160. Cf. John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 33–34.

<sup>19</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 176.



of the crucified Christ, an event seen as both temporal and eternal. In the cross, Moltmann argues, God's own being is an open fellowship of love. Thus, the trinitarian communion of the three persons of the Trinity is the source and model for genuine human community characterized by love and freedom, openness and acceptance rather than domination and exclusion.

The history of salvation is the history of the eternally living, triune God who draws us into and includes us in his eternal triune life with all the fullness of its relationships. It is the love story of the God whose very life is the eternal process of engendering, responding and blissful love. God loves the world with the very same love which he is in himself. If, on the basis of salvation history and the experience of salvation, we have to recognize the unity of the triune God in the perichoretic at-oneness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, then this does not correspond to the solitary human subject in his relationship to himself; nor does it correspond, either, to a human subject in his claim to lordship over the world. It only corresponds to a human fellowship of people without privileges and without subordinances. The perichoretic at-oneness of the triune God corresponds to the experience of the community of Christ, the community which the Spirit unites through respect, affection and love. The more open-mindedly people live with one another, for one another and in one another in the fellowship of the Spirit, the more they will become one with the Son and the Father, and one in the Son and the Father.<sup>20</sup>

1 Corinthians 15:28 ("that God may be all in all") is a key text in Moltmann's discussion of the eschatology of the Trinity. "The cross does not bring an end to the trinitarian history in God between the Father and the Son in the Spirit as eschatological history, but rather opens it up."<sup>21</sup> Thus, for Moltmann, the triune identity is itself moving toward consummation; it is as becoming rather than a static being.<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>20</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 157-158. This point is further developed in Moltmann's *The Spirit of Life*, tr. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 265. Moltmann finally abandons the "conceptual framework" of the immanent and economic Trinity and instead describes the Trinity according to four patterns: monarchical Trinity, historical Trinity, eucharistic Trinity, and the doxological Trinity. See *The Spirit of Life*, 290-306.

<sup>22</sup> John Thompson writes that, in Moltmann's view, the Trinity "is an evolving event between three divine subjects and the world and that the triune God is not complete until the end. Therefore, he can speak of a trinitarian history of God. The difficulty with this view is that it ties God to his relationship to the world and makes the world a

consummation of the Trinity will be a consummation of love as the Son surrenders the kingdom to his Father, that "love may be all in all."<sup>23</sup> Moltmann's trinitarian eschatology is necessarily universalistic as the Trinity is open and inclusive.

Eberhard Jüngel (1933–) of Tübingen has distinguished himself as a foremost interpreter of Barth by recasting Barth's trinitarian theology in the setting of the hermeneutical approach of Ernst Fuchs (1903–). Like Moltmann, Jüngel sees the doctrine of the Trinity as christologically anchored in the event of the cross. The doctrine of the Trinity is inexplicable apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus. But what is revealed in the cross corresponds to the way God is within himself. There is relationality within God. God's involvement in history *ad extra* corresponds to the divine life *ad intra*.

God's self-relatedness thus springs from the becoming which God's being is. The becoming in which God's being is a becoming out of the word in which God says Yes to himself. But to God's affirmation of himself there corresponds the affirmation of the creature through God. In the affirmation of his creature, as this affirmation becomes event in the incarnation of God, God reiterates his self-relatedness in his relation to the creature, as revealer, as becoming revealed and being revealed. This christological relation to the creature is also a becoming in which God's being is. But in that God in Jesus Christ *became* man, he is as creature exposed to perishing. Is God's being in becoming, here a being unto death?<sup>24</sup>

Jüngel goes on to answer his own question citing the Easter hymn: "Were he not raised/Then the world would have perished; But since he is raised/Then praise we the Father of Jesus Christ/Kyrie eleison!"<sup>25</sup> God remains true to himself as triune in the death of Jesus. In this way God's being for us in Christ expresses and is grounded in God's being for himself. This Jüngel sees, echoing Barth, as revelation—God's own interpretation of himself.<sup>26</sup> Thus he affirms the position of Rahner:

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contributory factor to the ultimate nature of God. God is therefore not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit without this relationship and reciprocity between himself and the world;" *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 255.

<sup>24</sup> Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming*, 107; emphasis original.

<sup>25</sup> Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming*, 108.

<sup>26</sup> Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming*, 15–25; and *God as the Mystery of the World*, tr. Darrel Guder (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 184–225.

Karl Rahner's thesis should be given unqualified agreement: 'The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.' This statement is correct because God himself takes place in Jesus' God-forsakenness and death (Mark 15:34–37). What the passion story narrates is the actual conceptualization of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>27</sup>

### III. Liberated Trinity: South and North

Leonardo Boff (1938–) and Catherine Mowry LaCugna (1952–1997) stand as examples of contemporary theologians who espouse a social trinitarianism. Leonardo Boff is a Brazilian liberation theologian and author of the 1986 book, *Trinity and Society*. Fueled by Moltmann, Boff attempts to locate in the Trinity the basis for a liberated society. The divine unity that exists between the three persons of the Trinity is reflected in human beings living together in community. As God is a union of three uniques so the human society does not blot out individuality but maintains a unity of egalitarian persons who live in co-relatedness. The communal or social exposition of the Trinity is seen by Boff as a way to move beyond the categories of essence and substance, which he deems to be static. Boff's communal Trinity embraces both masculine and feminine dimensions in Father, Son, and Spirit. Boff anticipates the charge of tritheism and believes that he avoids it by means of his articulation of the *perichoresis* of the three persons.

The *vestigia trinitatis* so vehemently rejected by Barth comes back in full force in Boff:

As there are traces of the Trinity in the whole cosmic order, so there are in human lives. Every human being is undoubtedly a mystery, with unfathomable depths not communicated to oneself or to others; this is the presence of the Father as deep, inner mystery in every human person. All men and women possess a dimension of truth, self-knowledge and self-revelation, the light and wisdom of their own mystery; this expresses the presence of the Son (Word and Wisdom) acting in them, developing the communication of their mystery. All human beings feel an urge to commune with others and be united in love; the Holy Spirit is present in this desire and in the joys of its

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<sup>27</sup> Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 369–370; emphasis original. Also see Jüngel's discussion of justification by faith as an "event in the being of the triune God" in *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, tr. Jefferey F. Cayzer (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 82–85.

fulfillment in this life. Mystery, truth and communion live together in each individual; they are interwoven realities that together make up the unity of life. They provide a reflection of trinitarian communion and are the ultimate foundation for humanity being the image and likeness of the Trinity.<sup>28</sup>

As Moltmann sought to bring history into the Trinity, so Boff seeks to bring creation into the life of the Trinity.

[Creation] prolongs and reflects the outpouring of life and love that eternally constitute the being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To use anthropomorphic language: the Trinity does not wish to live alone in its splendid trinitarian communion; the three divine Persons do not love just one another, but seek companions in communion and love. Creation arose from this wish of the three divine Persons to meet others (created by them) so as to include them in their eternal communion. Creation is external to the Trinity only so as to be brought within it.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, Boff retreats to the language of mystery.

What is manifested in our history is indeed God as God is, trinitarian. But the Trinity as absolute and sacramental mystery is much more than what is manifested . . . . What the Trinity is in itself is beyond our reach, hidden in unfathomable mystery, mystery that will be partially revealed to us in the bliss of eternal life, but will always escape us in full, since the Trinity is a mystery in itself and not only for human beings. So we have to say: the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, but not the whole immanent Trinity.<sup>30</sup>

A second exponent of social trinitarianism is Catherine LaCugna, who was teaching at Notre Dame at the time of her death from cancer in 1997. She is the author of *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* published in 1991. In this book, LaCugna seeks to show the practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity with its consequences for the Christian life. Like Boff, but with greater precision and more engagement of both classical and contemporary sources, LaCugna sees the Trinity in communal or relational categories. "Trinitarian theology could be described as par excellence a theology of relationship, which explores the mysteries of love, relationship,

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<sup>28</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, tr. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 223–224.

<sup>29</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 221–222.

<sup>30</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 215.

personhood and community within the framework of God's self-revelation in the person of Christ and the activity of the Spirit."<sup>31</sup>

The central thesis of LaCugna's book is that "soteriology and theology belong together because there is an essential unity between *oikonomia* and *theologia*."<sup>32</sup> Reviewing the history of the trinitarian doctrine, LaCugna concludes that, from the late fourth century on, theologians in both the East and West deviated from the earlier pattern of approaching the Godhead through the economy and instead explored questions of intratrinitarian life such as the equality of the persons. This, she argues, led to "the defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity."<sup>33</sup> Thus she confirms Rahner's conviction that most Christians are, in practice, mere monotheists. LaCugna maintains further that insofar as contemporary theologians continue to focus on the immanent Trinity they reinforce the impression that the doctrine of the Trinity has limited soteriological significance as it is limited to God's internal life and has no connection with the Christian life in the world.

LaCugna devotes the remainder of her book developing the claim that "The doctrine of the Trinity is not ultimately a teaching about 'God' but a teaching about *God's life with us and our life with each other*. It is the life of communion and indwelling, God in us, we in God, all of us in each other. This is the '*perichoresis*,' the mutual interdependence that Jesus speaks of in the Gospel of John."<sup>34</sup>

Drawing on the work of John Zizioulas, a contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologian, LaCugna seeks to develop a definition of person as relation in keeping with the Cappadocian pattern of speaking of the "unique hypostatic identity and distinction 'within' God without postulating a difference in substance between the divine persons."<sup>35</sup> Being constitutes personhood. "Being, existence, is thus the event of persons in

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<sup>31</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 1; emphasis original. Also see Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Kilian McDonnell, "Returning from the Far Country: Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988): 191-215. For a positive assessment of LaCugna's work by a feminist theologian, see Mary Catherine Hilker, "The Mystery of Persons in Communion: The Trinitarian Theology of Catherine Mowry LaCugna," *Word & World* (Summer 1998): 237-243.

<sup>32</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 210.

<sup>34</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 228.

<sup>35</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 243.

communion."<sup>36</sup> LaCugna then goes on to describe *perichoresis* as a "divine dance."<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately the questions of trinitarian theology are not, for LaCugna, speculative but practical. Trinitarian salvation is *theosis* according to LaCugna. Thus the basic, practical question of trinitarian theology is: "How are we to live and relate to others so as to be most Godlike?"<sup>38</sup>

LaCugna holds that relational trinitarianism has great promise for feminist theology because it lifts up mutuality rather than patriarchy. "As a revised doctrine of the Trinity makes plain, subordinationism is not natural but decidedly unnatural because it violates *both* the nature of God *and* the nature of persons created in the image of God."<sup>39</sup> LaCugna argues that authentic trinitarian existence will always be liberationist in character as the economy of Jesus Christ has established a new household unbounded by patriarchal distinctions. She admits that the church lost this vision quite early as the household codes of the post-Pauline and pastoral letters of the New Testament represent an accommodation to non-trinitarian patterns.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 249.

<sup>37</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 271. Here LaCugna draws on the work of Patricia Wilson-Kastner who argues that *perichoresis* is the glue that holds the three persons of the Trinity together in such a way as to establish an ethic that upholds three central values: inclusiveness, community, and freedom; see *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 131–133. For further research, also see David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Cunningham proposes that the titles Source, Wellspring, and Living Water be substituted for the traditional Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For a critique of feminist interpretations of the Trinity see Donald Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate Over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1985) and especially Alvin F. Kimel Jr., ed., *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992). This volume contains essays by Colin Gunton, Robert Jensen, Gerhard Forde, Thomas Torrance, Thomas Hopko and others who make an incisive critique of feminist proposals on the basis of orthodox trinitarian theology.

<sup>38</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 249.

<sup>39</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 398, emphasis original.

<sup>40</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 392. LaCugna's argument that the household code in Ephesians represents a loss of trinitarian vision is curious in light of the fact that she begins her book by citing Ephesians 1:3–14 as testimony to the trinitarian shape of salvation history.

#### IV. Blazing New Trails: East and West

There are certainly others who ought to be mentioned to round out any survey of contemporary theologians who have engaged the doctrine of the Trinity. We have already noted the significance of John Zizioulas (1931–) in the work of Catherine LaCugna. Although suspect in some Orthodox circles, his work, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, probes the connection between ontology and the communion that transpires between the persons of the Trinity.<sup>41</sup> In conversation with the Cappadocian discourse on the Trinity, Zizioulas maintains that “Being is simultaneously relational and hypostatic.”<sup>42</sup> His work has also been a source of influence for Miroslav Volf (1956–), a student of Moltmann, especially in his efforts to develop a trinitarian ecclesiology in *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.<sup>43</sup> The legacy of Karl Barth continues to find a lively voice in the work of Thomas Torrance (1913–).<sup>44</sup> Robert Jenson has emerged as perhaps the leading North American representative of contemporary trinitarian theology with his provocative assertion that the triune God is “one event with three identities” as an attempt to free the doctrine from a Hellenized abstraction.<sup>45</sup> In the tradition of George Lindbeck, Bruce Marshall (1955–) examines epistemic dimensions of the doctrine of the Trinity in *Trinity and Truth* published in 2000.<sup>46</sup> Colin Gunton (1941–2003) has produced several impressive contributions including *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (1991) and *The*

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<sup>41</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).

<sup>42</sup> John D. Zizioulas, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution,” in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 50.

<sup>43</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

<sup>44</sup> See especially Thomas Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988).

<sup>45</sup> Like Pannenberg, Jenson studied with the liturgical scholar Peter Brunner and the Lutheran Barthian, Edmund Schlink, at Heidelberg. Jenson’s major works on trinitarian theology include *Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); *Systematic Theology – Volume I: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and “Locus II: The Triune God” in *Christian Dogmatics – Volume I*, eds. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 79–191. For a variety of engagements with Jenson’s contributions, see *Trinity, Time, and the Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert Jenson*, ed. Colin Gunton (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

*Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (1998).<sup>47</sup> Shortly before his untimely death last year, his final work, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* was published.<sup>48</sup> In this book, Gunton engages in a critique of the separation of God's being from his actions in theologies that approach the attributes of God apart from his trinitarian being. Two recent books approach the doctrine of the Trinity through the practices of the church. Reinhard Hütter's *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* sees the work of the Trinity in the core practices or marks of the church, making the case that there can be no division between trinitarian dogma and the concrete practices that define and order the identity and character of the church.<sup>49</sup> Hütter, along with several other theologians, make this case explicit in a collection of essays edited by James Buckley and David Yeago entitled, *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*.<sup>50</sup> Using Luther's hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice," Oswald Bayer (1939-) teases out what he describes as a "poetological" doctrine of the Trinity asserting that this doctrine "considers nothing other than the gospel."<sup>51</sup>

### V. Where Is This Highway Going?

It is difficult to summarize the vast and varied work in contemporary trinitarian theology. It would be even more difficult to attempt a meaningful assessment that avoids generalizations. Nevertheless, I will single out a few themes that deserve some reflection and critique.

Mark Twain once remarked that in the beginning God created man in his own image and ever since man has returned the compliment. It seems that this is what we see in the social trinitarians—Moltmann, Boff, and LaCugna. Moltmann's early work, *The Theology of Hope*, was his own attempt to provide a theological parallel to the Jewish Marxist Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope*, and Moltmann continues to work out the

<sup>47</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990); and *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Colin Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

<sup>50</sup> James Buckley and David Yeago eds., *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Oswald Bayer, "Poetological Doctrine of the Trinity" *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (Spring 2001): 43-58; emphasis original. For further discussion, see also "The Triune God" in *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 52-57.



eschatological implications of this theme in his later works on the Trinity. Boff sees the Trinity as a model of liberation for the poor and the oppressed. LaCugna finds in social trinitarianism a resource for an egalitarian, non-patriarchal God and church. The Trinity is abstracted from creation and history, which is ironically the very error Moltmann claims to avoid.

Here we might inquire as to what this means for ethics. Paul Jersild, a recently retired professor from the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, published a book in 2000 entitled *Spirit Ethics: Scripture and the Moral Life*. In this volume, Jersild seeks to ground Christian ethics in the work of the Holy Spirit. While he does not cite Moltmann or LaCugna, his argument runs parallel to theirs in significant ways.

After a critique of the presumed authoritarianism of antiquated notions of reading the Scriptures, Jersild opts for a view of biblical authority that is open-ended. Thus a Spirit ethic, while recognizing the inspiration of the Scriptures, will nevertheless be an ethic of openness to the future. A broadened concept of inspiration will enable the church to engage the Bible in a meaningful conversation. This dialogical method of listening to Scripture encourages the “fruitful engagement of moral imagination” in an impossible way seeing Scripture as a source of moral absolutes.<sup>52</sup> “The notion of a deposit of eternal truths ‘once for all delivered to the saints’ is entirely inappropriate in regard to our moral tradition, for in this realm we are dealing with our response to the Gospel, not the Gospel itself.”<sup>53</sup>

Rather than attempting to extract specific and concrete moral teachings from the New Testament, the church, Jersild opines, ought to concentrate on a cluster of images—love, freedom, and responsibility—that are at the heart of the New Testament’s ethical vision. According to Jersild, a Spirit ethic will bear the marks of God’s presence and display his empowering love. A Spirit ethic will listen to the Scriptures and “the contemporary experience of the church as it grapples with difficult moral issues.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Jersild, *Spirit Ethics: Scripture and the Moral Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>53</sup> Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 134.

<sup>54</sup> Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 135.

Having established the basis for his ethics, Jersild then turns to the current debate surrounding homosexuality. Worried that many Christians, under the influence of natural law thinking have adopted an "excessively physicalist approach to homosexuality," Jersild instead urges the church to revise its traditional stance on homosexuality in a way that exhibits acceptance and responsible freedom.<sup>55</sup>

Jersild has effectively collapsed the Trinity into the Spirit. His concern over an "excessively physicalist approach to homosexuality" evidences his lack of a trinitarian doctrine of creation. Christoph Schwöbel observed: "The search for relevance, so it appears, comes into conflict with fundamental dogmatic tenets of a Christian theology of creation. What seems to be needed is not an ethics of creation, but an *ethic of createdness* which is informed by a *theology of creation*."<sup>56</sup>

The ethic that Schwöbel calls for cannot be sustained by the trinitarian theology of LaCugna. LaCugna pits personhood against nature in such a way as to dismiss the significance of the createdness of male and female. She endorses the conclusion of Margaret Farley:

If the ultimate normative model for relationship between persons is the very life of the Trinitarian God, then a strong eschatological ethic suggests itself as a context for Christian justice. That is to say, interpersonal communion characterized by equality, mutuality, and reciprocity may serve not only as a norm against which every pattern of relationship may be measured but as a goal to which every pattern of relationship is ordered.<sup>57</sup>

Here we must ask if equality, mutuality, and reciprocity are derived from the biblical doctrine of the Trinity or from our postmodern culture that is characterized by its drive toward autonomy. Creational distinctions are lost as the self-differentiation within the Trinity, which is exchanged for a communal theology that is but a murky reflection of our culture's gnostic spirituality.

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<sup>55</sup> Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 139.

<sup>56</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, "God, Creation and the Christian Community: The Dogmatic Basis of a Christian Ethic of Createdness" in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 150; emphasis original. Also see Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Orders," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1998): 125-160.

<sup>57</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 282.

Any sexual activity that reflects equality, mutuality, and reciprocity is deemed to be iconic of the Creator.

Sexuality can be a sacred means of becoming divinized by the Spirit of God instead of a tool to exercise control over others, or an aspect of ourselves that is to be feared and avoided. Alienated or alienating expressions of sexuality, practices that are truly 'unnatural' in the sense of being contrary to personhood, contravene the very life of God. In contrast, fruitful, healthy, creative, integrated sexuality enables persons to live from and for others. Sexual practices and customs can be iconic of divine life, true images of the very nature of the triune God.<sup>58</sup>

What is unnatural in LaCugna's estimation is not that which is contrary to our being creatures of the triune God but rather contrary to our personhood. As defined by the categories of autonomy and capacity, personhood becomes ambiguous as we witness in Justice Harry Blackmun's declaration that "the word person as used in the 14th Amendment does not include the unborn."<sup>59</sup> The initial promise of LaCugna's book to offer a soteriological theology of the Trinity that has as its corollary in the life of the Christian in and with God is lost.

## VI. Conclusion

There are many issues that this brief overview of contemporary trinitarian theology has addressed only minimally or not at all. The debate

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<sup>58</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 407. David Cunningham follows LaCugna in drawing out the implications for the acceptance of homosexual unions: "I have already suggested that the doctrine of the Trinity can help us to understand and evaluate the nature of the relationships among bodies, including relationships that involve sexual desire. The question which remains, is whether it necessarily limits those forms to opposite-sex relationships. And as far as I can see, there is nothing in trinitarian doctrine that has a word to say, in any *prima facie* sense, against monogamous gay or lesbian relationships. In such relationships, mutual participation is clearly possible, just as in opposite-sex relationships. The same-sex partner is still an 'other,' and fully capable of embodying the trinitarian view of particularity. The doctrine of the Trinity does not seem to address anatomical features of the desired body; God manifests yearning, desire, and love for the *otherness* of the other, but this otherness is not limited to—nor does it necessarily even involve—questions of sexual differentiation." *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 300. Only a hermeneutic completely detached from the trinitarian narrative of the Scriptures could arrive at such a conclusion. Barth rightly points to the "structural differentiation" of man's duality as male and female; see *Church Dogmatics III:II*, 286.

<sup>59</sup> John Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 146–147.

over the *filioque* will continue. The avoidance or the complete exclusion of the name of the Trinity in liturgical forms and hymns will be a most obvious feature distinguishing orthodoxy from the new unitarianism already evident in the mainline churches. On both scholarly and popular fronts, the likes of Marcus Borg offer up another Christ *sans* Trinity who is confessed not as the only-begotten Son of the Father but as a mistaken mystic.<sup>60</sup> In today's world, we are confronted anew with questions relative to the triune God versus the gods of the nations. The significance of these topics cannot be fully apprehended apart from a critical engagement of the theologians we have examined. This survey has attempted to identify some of the leading players in contemporary theological discussion of the Trinity and map out at least a few key features of their thinking. We have noted the twists and the turns, both the rediscovery of the church's confession of the triune God and not a few detours from the path of biblical orthodoxy. Thus, Uwe Siemon-Netto, a Lutheran lay theologian, offers this timely challenge:

... postmodernity's profusion of bogus and ever-changing 'truths' and 'values' can only be overcome by a renewal of trinitarian theology – not in the watered-down version of liberal theology: No cheap anthropocentric metaphors are in order here. Rather theologians must learn to speak about the triune God in a new language that resonates with the post-post-modern people who are attempting to come out of the spiritual bankruptcy into which the quest for autonomy has led them. This may well be one of the most important tasks for theologians in the almost 2000 years of church history. It is an urgent task. There is no time to lose.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> Uwe Siemon-Netto, *One Incarnate Truth: Christianity's Answer to Spiritual Chaos* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 157.