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The Trinity and the Freedom of God

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A contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity is essential for recognizing, upholding and respecting divine freedom as the basis of relevant theological activity and genuine human freedom. In this article I contend that divine freedom will be recognized and respected only if and to the extent that such recognition is grounded in God's actual freedom for us exercised in the history of Jesus Christ and through the action of his Holy Spirit.¹ Hearing this thesis in a vacuum one could perhaps wonder why anyone would bother to say this at all since most contemporary theologians would agree with this thesis, at least formally. But this thesis is in fact loaded because, while most Christian theologians would agree that a doctrine of the immanent Trinity should help us recognize, uphold and respect God's freedom as the basis, meaning and goal of human freedom, very many contemporary theologians tend to read back their experiences and concepts into God instead of allowing God the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit to define the content of those concepts and experiences.

In other words I believe that Athanasius's all important statement that "It is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name him from his works and call him Unoriginate" should govern contemporary thought about divine and human relations.² Indeed, if this Athanasian insight were respected today, then the dangers of Arianism, which Colin Gunton has recently called the "favorite" and "most appealing" heresy of the 20th century,³ could be overcome in such a way that instead of us creating God in our image based on our ideas and experiences of relationality, temporality, maternity and paternity, we may once again recognize that it is God who has in fact created us in his image and that God's revelation is not a construct of human experience but a sovereign act of a loving God within history, which includes the history of human experience.

¹ This thesis is developed more fully in my recent book, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London/New York: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2002), hereafter *Divine Freedom*. It also includes a fuller discussion of the main works cited below.

² Athanasius, *Contra Ar.* 1.34, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, trans. and ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 326. Cf. also Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (hereafter: *The Trinitarian Faith*), (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 6 and 49.

³ Colin E. Gunton, "Begotten, Not Made," in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2001), 35.

In order to accomplish this I will argue for what can be termed a contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity. Such a doctrine in the first instance would avoid irrelevant speculation about God's inner nature, abstracted from God's own self-revelation because this is and has been damaging to theology and practice within the Church. There are two implications here: first, one must avoid confusing or separating the immanent and economic Trinity; and second, one must adhere to the economic Trinity for one's information about the immanent Trinity. In the second instance a contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity would be aware that many modern theologians either argue against such a doctrine or simply pay lip-service to it precisely because they realize the importance of such a doctrine in recognizing and upholding God's freedom and distinction from creation. A contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity will certainly want to avoid either of these alternatives.

In formulating a contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity I rely on the thinking of Karl Barth who argues that "the content of the doctrine of the Trinity...is not that God in His relation to man is Creator, Mediator and Redeemer, but that God in Himself is eternally God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit...[God acting as Emmanuel] cannot be dissolved into His work and activity."⁴ Hence while Barth insisted that the immanent Trinity was identical in content with the economic Trinity, he also made a clear and sharp distinction in order to underscore God's freedom *in se* and *ad extra*. Without acknowledging that freedom and without allowing that freedom to determine what can and cannot be said about God and God's relations with us in history, theology would simply become our conversation with ourselves with the result that we would be unable to recognize our deepest human need, which is for the righteousness that can only come from God himself. We would therefore find ourselves alone with ourselves and more and more cut off from the only true source of human freedom.

While most contemporary theologians accept Rahner's axiom that "the immanent Trinity is strictly identical with the economic Trinity and vice versa," I argue here that it is precisely the *vice versa* that has caused so many today, including Rahner himself, to compromise both divine and human freedom.⁵ Such thinking, which begins agnostically with the idea that God is perhaps in the first instance to be recognized as the nameless, holy mystery or as a matrix surrounding human life, leaves it to us, at least in some measure, to fill in the gap created by that agnostic view. Inevitably that gap is filled with pantheistic and dualistic images of God and God's relations with us in history so that it seems that pantheism and dualism are the only alternatives to a theology that is actually grounded in the Trinitarian self-revelation. That is why, in addition to relying on Barth's key insights regarding the Trinity, I also rely on the thought of Thomas F. Torrance to

⁴ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, vol. 1, pt. 2 of *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts. (hereafter: *CD*) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970), 878–79.

⁵ Karl Rahner, "Theology and Anthropology," trans. Graham Harrison, vol. 9 in *Theological Investigations*, 23 vols. (hereafter: *TI*) (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 28–45, 32. See also *TI* 9, 130. Cf. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. by Joseph Donceel, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 22–30.

maintain that an accurate understanding of the triune God can only take place if we think from a center in God rather than from a center in ourselves. Of course God himself provides that center in the incarnation and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And that is precisely why a clear distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, reason and revelation, nature and grace and philosophy and theology is crucial.

Put succinctly, I maintain that there are several indications that God's freedom has been compromised (along with human freedom) by those theologians whose thinking is not actually shaped by the economic Trinitarian self-revelation, despite the fact that many of these same theologians claim they really are starting their thinking with the economic Trinitarian self-revelation: 1) the trend towards making God, in some sense, dependent upon and indistinguishable from history; 2) the lack of precision in Christology which leads to the idea that Jesus, in his humanity as such, is the revealer; 3) the failure to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the human spirit; 4) the trend to begin theology with experiences of self-transcendence, thus allowing experience rather than the object of faith to determine the truth of theology.

Regarding the first indication, let us briefly explore the trend towards making God, in some sense, dependent upon and indistinguishable from history. A number of contemporary proposals fall into this category. For instance, using the image of a dance, Catherine LaCugna argues that "There are not two sets of communion—one among the divine persons, the other among human persons.... The one *perichoresis*, the one mystery of communion includes God and humanity as beloved partners in the dance."⁶ Lest there be any confusion about what she means, LaCugna continues by saying "The exodus of all persons from God and the return of all to God is the divine dance in which God and we are eternal partners." And this leads to the conclusion that "The life of God is not something that belongs to God alone. *Trinitarian life is also our life*.... 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*."⁷

Lutheran theologian Ted Peters follows LaCugna's thinking, stressing these exact thoughts in his book on the Trinity: "As soon as we free ourselves from thinking of two levels of Trinity, one *ad intra* and the other *ad extra*, then we can see again that there is but one life of the triune God; and that life includes God's relation to us."⁸ Hence Peters affirms LaCugna's belief that "The life of God is not something that belongs to God alone. *Trinitarian life is also our life*."⁹ Peters thus argues that we need not assume that the three persons of the Trinity are identical or equal in nature because "The notion of one being in three persons is simply a conceptual device for trying

⁶ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 274.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 222–24 and 228.

⁸ Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 125.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

to understand the drama of salvation that is taking place in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ And this leads him to conclude, using as his criterion relationality as understood in social psychology, that “the fullness of God as Trinity is a reality yet to be achieved in the eschatological consummation.”¹¹

The point of this article, however, is that the doctrine of the Trinity is indeed ultimately a teaching about God. In and through that teaching we are able to recognize that, as Barth put it, “We cannot say anything higher or better of the ‘inwardness of God’ than that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and therefore that He is love in Himself without and before loving us, and without being forced to love us.”¹² This triunity is the only viable basis of human freedom as well. Yet, because our knowledge of God is really grounded in God himself acting *ad extra* we cannot change who God is by seeking some sort of description for God that ignores or compromises the fact that from eternity God really is none other than the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a unique and transcendent way. And when this God acts for us in history he does not abandon this internal freedom but exercises it. That exercise of God’s freedom for us is the unshakable ground of Christian knowledge and ethics. This freedom of God is what has been blurred and called into question by the rather pantheistic understanding of the Trinity espoused by LaCugna and Peters. And it is just for this reason that their thinking undermines any genuine perception of contingent human freedom in its distinction from God with its own relevancy given by God himself.

What sense does it make to speak about God’s life with us and our life with each other when God does not have a life in himself? In the thinking of LaCugna and Peters the word God simply loses its meaning by becoming no more than a description of our relations with each other which are then described as God’s own relation to himself. This issue is discussed at length in my book, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, and is related to LaCugna’s dualistic idea that she cannot find God in Jesus Christ except insofar as he humanly embodies “divinization.” Thus for her “His person, as the achievement of truly divinized human nature is in this sense [that he lived, died and was raised to eternal life] eternal”¹³ while for Ted Peters “the divinity of the Son is gained through his total identification with the Father: Jesus embodies the Father’s will...those who put their faith in Jesus find themselves putting their faith in God.”¹⁴

But LaCugna and Peters are not alone. Other contemporary theologians think God is somehow dependent on history for the unfolding of his being. This can be seen in the thinking of Robert Jenson and Wolfhart Pannenberg. While Barth insisted that the *Logos Asarkos* had a proper role to play in Trinitarian theology and in Christology, Robert Jenson opposes any thought of a *Logos Asarkos* and instead argues that Rahner’s axiom is acceptable if it is understood eschatologically. That is why he argues that “Instead of interpreting Christ’s deity as a separate

¹⁰ Ibid., 70.

¹¹ Ibid., 16.

¹² *CD* 1/2, 377.

¹³ *God For Us*, 317 and 296.

¹⁴ *God as Trinity*, 180.

entity that always *was*...we should interpret it as a final *outcome*, and just so as eternal.”¹⁵ But this means that Jesus will not finally be the eternal Son of the Father until salvation is complete, just as the economic Trinity will not be the immanent Trinity until salvation is complete. Such thinking, with its adoptionist overtones, leads to the idea that Christ’s Sonship comes from his resurrection with the twin ideas that “Jesus would not be the Word without the Resurrection” and “the resurrection is [the Christian] God’s *ousia*.”¹⁶ It goes without saying that such thinking compromises Christ’s antecedent existence as the eternal Son of the Father before all worlds.

Pannenberg’s thinking is influential here: “Only the Easter event determines what the meaning was of the pre-Easter history of Jesus and who he was in his relation to God.”¹⁷ And “Apart from Jesus’ resurrection, it would not be true that from the very beginning of his earthly way God was one with this man. That is true from all eternity *because* of Jesus’ resurrection.”¹⁸ Perhaps the most important indicator in this circumstance is the idea expressed by Ted Peters that “God’s eternity is gained through the victory of resurrection and transformation.”¹⁹ The most important point that needs to be made here is that with the acknowledgment of God’s pre-temporal self-sufficient existence in the form of a limited acceptance of a *Logos Asarkos* we are led to see that God does not need to gain his eternity by relating with history, but rather reveals the distinct nature of his eternity through the events of Jesus’ life and through the power of the resurrection in particular.

Regarding the second indication that both divine and human freedom tend to be compromised today, let me briefly explain the lack of precision in Christology that follows from the belief that Jesus in his humanity as such is the revealer. This is Rahner’s position. But it has been widely influential across the board in contemporary theology. And the basic problem is that it implies a confusion of Jesus’ divinity and humanity so that one could then suppose that revelation becomes an element in Jesus’ human experience and then in our experience of ourselves through what Rahner labels our experience of self-transcendence. Indeed at least one Rahnerian actually interprets Christ’s humanity as his divinity under the rubric “theandric.”²⁰ Thus he writes, “For Rahner, human nature, though created, is potentially divine, and in the case of Christ actually so.”²¹ That is why Rahner argues that revelation is in some sense identical with what he calls our “transcendentality” and that self-acceptance is the same as acceptance of Christ. That thinking opens the door to his anonymous Christianity which in my view undercuts the need for faith in

¹⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *God According to the Gospel: The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 140.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74–5.

¹⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 345.

¹⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 321.

¹⁹ *God as Trinity*, 175.

²⁰ David Coffey, “The Theandric Nature of Christ,” *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 405–31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 412.

Christ himself and universalizes grace and revelation by detaching them from Christ and locating them once again within human experience in a Pelagian way in the form of the supernatural existential. But I believe that Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson are correct in their judgment that the supernatural existential is a highly unstable concept that, when universalized, amounts to little more than an immanentism not unlike Schleiermacher's God-consciousness.²² Curiously it is just this thinking that also opens the door to a Nestorian separation of the two natures in Christ, and once again invites dualistic conceptions of our relations with the Christian God.

The third and fourth indications mentioned above are inseparably bound together. Hence failure to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the human spirit, which is all too widespread today, stems from starting theology with experiences of self-transcendence instead of with the Word of God revealed, written and proclaimed. I believe that whenever theology is unclear about the fact that it is strictly the object of faith, namely, the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit who determines the truth of theology, then the experience of faith is thought to become the source and norm for theology. This has led to disastrous results; the most prominent among these is the idea that God can and should be understood on the basis of our own self-experience. This thinking drives Rahner's transcendental method and leads to a conflict in his thinking.

Thus, on the one hand Rahner wishes to unite fundamental and dogmatic theology by beginning his thought with the economic Trinitarian self-revelation. But on the other hand Rahner actually begins his theology with the method of natural theology by analyzing transcendental experience to arrive at a knowledge of God as the nameless silent term of the experience of transcendence. Rahner therefore describes God as the "holy mystery" surrounding our lives. But the God thus known is in conflict with the God that Rahner believes we know through God's self-communication in Christ through the Holy Spirit. What happens in the thought of too many contemporary theologians is that they allow questions of theological content to be dictated by the naturally known God encountered in their own experiences of self-transcendence with the result that even God's triunity is shaped by their naturally known God and both divine and human freedom are compromised in the process.²³

There is space here for only one example of what I mean. Elizabeth Johnson follows Rahner's transcendental method and concludes that since human experience and knowledge of God are mutually dependent, therefore "the personal history of the experience of the self is in its total extent the history of the ultimate experience of God also."²⁴ This leads her to argue that

²² Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Carlisle, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1992), 246–47.

²³ For a full discussion of this difficulty in Rahner's theology see Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, Chapter Four.

²⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 66.

God must be reconceived as Mother so that the symbol God may function by overcoming any inequality that still exists between men and women today. But the problem with this thinking is that it operates from a center in human experience rather than from a center in God with the result that the limitations of experience are projected into God. The suggestion in this thinking is that God is a symbol that we humans invest with meaning to achieve certain social, religious or political goals. But the problem with naming God Mother is primarily the suggestion that it is our political, religious or social agenda that allows such a redefinition of the Christian God. If, however, Barth is correct, and I think he is, and there is nothing higher or deeper to God than the fact that he is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in eternity and as God for us in history, then this thinking represents more an attempt to re-create God in our own image than to accept God as he is and as he has created us in his image.

This thinking fails to realize that God was not named Mother in scripture or in the tradition for very definite reasons. As Roland Frye has argued, many feminist theologians make the mistake of confusing metaphor and simile, and then make the additional mistake of thinking that because a word like Sophia has a feminine ending therefore God could be thought of as the divine feminine.²⁵ But the difficulty with this is that it has Arian, Gnostic and polytheist overtones. And as Elizabeth Achtemeier has pointed out, while Israel was surrounded by people who worshipped female deities, Israel worshipped one God who could not be identified with the world: "It is precisely the introduction of female language for God that opens the door to such identification of God with the world."²⁶

The ultimate difficulty here of course stems from the way analogy is conceived. According to Elizabeth Johnson, "analogy...means that while it [human naming of God] starts from the relationship of paternity experienced at its best in this world, its inner dynamism negates the creaturely mode to assert that God is more unlike than like even the best human father."²⁷ But according to the analogy of faith as understood by Barth, any such analogy must start from Jesus Christ himself and thus think from a center in God rather than from a center in ourselves. It is just because Johnson begins her theology by insisting that God must be named from within the matrix of women's experience that she reaches this conclusion regarding analogy. But it is just this thinking that compromises a proper understanding of God's fatherhood in its utter uniqueness as something that cannot be known by negating our human experience of fatherhood. Johnson's thinking ultimately leads her to argue that we can never really describe God's inner being and that "God is *like* a Trinity."²⁸ It goes without saying, of course, that God

²⁵ See Roland Frye, "Language for God and Feminist Language: Problems and Principles," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41, 4 (1988): 441-69. See also *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992).

²⁶ Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods,'" in Kimel, *Speaking the Christian God*, 8-9.

²⁷ *She Who Is*, 173.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

is not *like* a Trinity because God exists eternally as the Triune God—he *is* a Trinity in unity and not just a Trinity but the Trinity. And that means he never exists in any other way except as the eternal Father, Son and Spirit in indissoluble unity and indestructible distinction.

There is then a thread that runs through the theologians we have briefly canvassed in this article. That commonality suggests there is a tendency to allow experience rather than the Word of God revealed to dictate the meaning of theological categories. That very fact illustrates a confusion of the Holy Spirit with the human spirit. It is my contention that a contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity should recognize that while the doctrine of the Trinity begins with an experience of God in the economy, it nonetheless directs us away from our experiences and toward God's Word and Spirit as the source of theological knowledge. To be sure, God meets us in our experiences of faith and hope; but the object of Trinitarian reflection is and remains God and never becomes our experiences of faith and hope. In this sense the doctrine of the immanent Trinity is a description of who God is who meets us in and through our experiences and not simply a description of salvation history or of our experiences of faith and hope. Whenever and wherever theologians think the doctrine is simply a way of describing the Christian experiences of faith, hope or salvation (which unfortunately happens all too frequently today), such thinking invariably substitutes some form of Trinitarian thinking for the Trinitarian God acting *ad extra*. And any such substitution compromises both divine and human freedom by beginning to think of God agnostically and then ending with some form of pantheism or dualism and far from the Christian God who really is for us but for us only in his Word and Spirit.