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Trinity

The Christian God

CHAPTER OUTLINE

At the beginning of my lecture on the doctrine of the Trinity, I usually ask my students to share their initial perceptions of the doctrine. Here are some of the responses I have heard over the years: "confusing," "contradictory," "nonsensical," "clumsy mathematics," "mystery," "God is three-in-one," "the Christian view of God," and "a difficult doctrine to understand." After listening to their responses, I normally ask this follow-up question: Is the doctrine of the Trinity essential to Christianity? Many of them stare in confusion, some audaciously say no, and a few timidly say yes. These answers may not be too far from the responses of the majority of Christians. On the one hand, the Trinity is Christianity's greatest and most unique contribution to the discussion on God in the religious market. On the other hand, it is a doctrine that is framed with theological concepts and words that are extremely difficult to explain. Many theologians find the words of the North African-born theologian Augustine most helpful in their explication of the doctrine of the Trinity: "And I would make this pious

and safe agreement with all who read my writings, as well in all other cases as, above all, in the case of those which inquire into the unity of the Trinity, of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; because in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable."[1] Undoubtedly, Augustine has given a wise counsel.

Since the Trinitarian idea of God found its way into the theology and liturgy of the church, Christians have struggled to deal with the theological and practical problems associated with the Trinity. They have wrestled with the following questions, among others: What does it mean to say that God is "triune"? How are we to meaningfully describe the divine persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Should the emphasis be on the "threeness" or on the "oneness"? Are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit "a community of gods," as the Nigerian theologian A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya has proposed?[2] Should we continue to describe God with predominantly male language?

The Trinity—the belief that the "one" God exists in three distinct yet interrelated persons—is a major doctrine of God that was propounded by some theologians in the early church. Among the numerous difficulties Christians face when they speak about God, these questions are highly formative: Is God knowable? Can human beings experience God? Is it humanly possible to speak meaningfully about God? What is God's gender? Is God actively involved in the world? In what ways does God relate to the world? What is the identity of God? These are samples of the questions that shape the discussions on the doctrine of the Trinity.

Christianity teaches that the world exists and subsists because God has brought it into existence and is preserving it. Christians claim that human beings know God because God has revealed God's self to humanity. They have also learned, in the words of Langdon Gilkey, that "the idea of God remains the most elusive, the most frequently challenged, the most persistently criticized and negated of all important convictions."[3] Christians, however, have not shied away from the difficulty of teaching about God's existence and actions.

In chapter 2, we saw that Christians believe that human beings can know and experience God because God has revealed God's self to humanity. They also frequently describe God as a *mystery*—that which can only be known when revealed. God remains concealed in God's self-disclosure to humanity. Therefore, anyone who aims to explain God's modes of existence and acts faces two related challenges. The first challenge is to avoid an intellectual idolatry—reducing God to *what we want God to be* or describing

1. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 1.3.5.
2. Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 23.
3. Gilkey, "God," 88.

God in a manner that *contradicts* God's self-revelation. The second challenge is to correctly interpret and appropriate God's self-disclosure *kerygmatically*—the proclamation that God was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to God's self (2 Cor 5:19).

A direct study of God's divine nature eludes humanity. Human beings can study only God's self-disclosure; we can study, interpret, and explain only what God has revealed about God's self. One successful approach to the study of God is *naming*. In most cases, the names given to God are metaphors believers use to describe their understandings and experiences of God. Three observations are noteworthy.

First, naming God should be an attempt to describe God's identity and acts in our limited ways and should not be an attempt to construct a God after our own image and likeness. Christians' naming of God should not contradict the expressions of God's identity in the Bible. Second, no single name for God can encapsulate the mystery of God. Since the divine names in the Bible are not exhaustive, we should not shy away from naming God afresh. Third, people name, and ought to name, God from their encounter with God. In Gen 16:13, Hagar named God *El Roi*, "the God who sees me," after God spoke to her in the desert. Upon seeing God's provision of a ram for sacrifice, Abraham called God *Yahweh yireh*, "Jehovah will provide" (Gen 22: 14). The Igbo people of southeast Nigeria call God *O loro ihe loro enyi* (literally, "the One who swallows a being that has swallowed an elephant") when they want to describe the strength and power of God. The *Trinity* is a Christian name for God that expresses, albeit non-exhaustively, the God of the Bible who calls people into a relationship through the life and work of Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

In this chapter, I will discuss some major Christian beliefs about the identity and work of God, focusing on the meaning, nature, and implications of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Imagining the Trinity

Christians confess that God is one, a confession they learned from Judaism (Deut 6:4). Unlike adherents to Judaism, they also confess that God exists as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. As attested by some of the earliest ecumenical church councils, these three "persons" share divine nature and divine attributes. Stanley Grenz notes that Christianity teaches that

FOCUS QUESTION:
What does it mean to say that God is triune?

"there is no God but the triune God; God is none other than Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."[4] The greatest difficulty with the doctrine of the Trinity is how to simultaneously explain God's oneness and God's threeness. Is God three persons who are one? Or are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit three "aspects" of a single being? For some critics of the Trinity, it is contradictory, unwarranted, and unjustifiable to construe God as three-in-one. Yet many Christian theologians have continued to proclaim the Trinity as the key to understanding the God who is described in the Bible.

The core of Christian theology can be summarized thus: *God was in Jesus of Nazareth reconciling creation to God's self in the power of the Holy Spirit* (2 Cor 5:19; Gal 4:4–6). But how are we to understand the doctrine of the Trinity? What exactly do Christians hope to convey when they speak of God as triune? What are the implications of thinking of God simultaneously in terms of oneness and threeness? Although we do not know exactly when a Trinitarian idea became part of the liturgical and theological life of the earliest Christian communities, we do know that by the second century CE Christians freely spoke about God in connection with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. A Trinitarian idea was clearly present "in the liturgy, in baptism, and the Eucharist" of the earliest Christian communities.[5] As the early church began to iron out its theological identity, the doctrine of the Trinity became one of its unique theological hallmarks. It became the distinct way of speaking about God that set Christianity apart from other religions. As Karl Barth says, "The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation."[6] Barth goes on to say that the content of the doctrine of the Trinity should be "decisive and controlling for the whole of dogmatics" or Christian theologies and beliefs.[7] Nowadays the majority of Christian theologians accept the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for the identity of Christianity. Some continue to be skeptical about the importance of the doctrine. But whether one accepts the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity, "faith in the risen Christ and testimony to the outpoured and indwelling Spirit require a theological explication of the monotheistic confession that is consistent with the awareness of a more pluralist dimension to the saving action of God and the graced recognition of the same in worship and doctrine."[8]

4. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 66.
5. Jenson, *Triune God*, 11.
6. Barth, *CD* 1/1, 301.
7. Ibid., 303.
8. Del Colle, "Triune God," 122.

The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity

At an astonishingly early period, Christians faced a tremendous challenge—to explain their understandings of Jesus' relationship to God, both of whom they worshipped. The religious context in which they lived intensified this challenge. Most followers of Jesus Christ were adherents of Judaism who confessed that "the LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut 6:4, NIV). In the context of Judaism, Christians needed to demonstrate that they were not polytheists and blasphemers. In the context of the Greco-Roman religions, Christians were compelled to show that they were not atheists—those who were impious and did not believe in the Greco-Roman gods. From the second century CE onward, Christians faced the challenge of explaining their understandings of the relationship between God (the Father), Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit as expressed in the Bible (Matt 28:19; Rom 15:30; 2 Cor 13:14; Gal 4:4–6; Eph 1:3–14).

Since the expressions "three-in-one" and "triune" are not used in the Bible, many have wondered why this doctrine developed in the first place. Others have wondered if it is biblical—that is, if the doctrine of the Trinity maintains fidelity to the ideas of God presented in the Bible. I have summarized below some of the key issues that early Christian theologians considered as they hammered out the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Identity of Jesus

Christians faced the challenge of explaining (*a*) their reasons for worshipping Jesus Christ and (*b*) their understandings of God and God's relationship to Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. As the Bible shows, the earliest followers of Jesus treated him as a "god" by worshipping him. In Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi, he references the christological ode or hymn that reveals the elevated status Jesus held in the theology and liturgy of the early church. Speaking of Jesus, Paul writes, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil 2:6–7, NIV). For those early Christians, it was not sufficient to confess that God acted in Jesus Christ, who was a mere messiah. They also believed that Jesus shared God's "form" or nature. Some earliest Christians even went further to state that dishonoring Jesus Christ entails dishonoring God the Father (John 5:22–23). These understandings of Jesus Christ informed the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly its articulation by the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and the Council of Constantinople (381 CE).

Christians' View of Monotheism

The majority of the earliest followers of Jesus Christ were Jews. Many of them, of course, grew up in families and religious communities where *monotheism* (the idea that only one true God exists) was taught as the major distinguishing factor of Jewish theology. The problem that the earliest Jewish Christians faced was how to worship Jesus Christ as the Messiah who shared God's nature (Phil 3:6–7) and at the same hold the monotheistic view of God (Deut 6:4). This apparent contradiction posed a great threat to the credibility and uniqueness of Christianity. Christians needed to explain their concept of monotheism and its correlation to and difference from Jewish exclusivist monotheism—the view of monotheism that ruled out any idea of plurality. Undoubtedly, Jesus' exalted status signals early Christians' modification of Jewish exclusivist monotheism.[9] While the earliest (Jewish) followers of Jesus Christ were unwilling to abandon the Jewish concept of monotheism, they were ready to construe monotheism in a way that was contrary to exclusivist monotheism.

The Need for Theological Models

Since the second century CE, Christian communities have explored differently ways of speaking about God's relationship with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Numerous theological models appeared. All were rigorously tested; many were rejected. The Trinitarian metaphors, such as "triune" and "Trinity," survived as the most acceptable. Although the doctrine of the Trinity now enjoys a lasting influence on Christian communities, there were other theological metaphors that had great influence on earlier Christian communities. Some of those theological models continue to appear in contemporary works, albeit in revised and modified forms. I will describe briefly three theological models that appeared in the first three centuries. These models will shed more light on the doctrine of the Trinity.

*Modalism***:** This view is also called *Sabellianism* and is usually associated with two third-century presbyters—Noetus of Smyrna and Sabellius.[10] Modalism teaches that God is numerically one. God has *appeared* in three distinct forms or "costumes," however—namely, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They were not concrete beings but rather "the modes by which God has acted in history."[11] God is like an actor in a drama who plays three

9. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 48–53.
10. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 119.
11. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, 47.

characters by wearing three masks or costumes. Terms such as *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* do not represent real distinctions but are merely applicable to one God at different times.[12] One of the implications of the modalistic view of God is *patripassianism*—the belief that God the Father suffered and died on the cross. Modalists aim (*a*) to maintain the identical natures of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father, and (*b*) to preserve monotheism and the numerical oneness of God. The weakness of this view is its failure to account for the distinctiveness of the three persons of the Godhead. Jesus Christ (God the Son), for example, was not praying to himself at those times he prayed to God (John 17). Leonardo Boff also argues that modalism "does not advance beyond Judaism and fails to teach the Christian novelty of three divine Persons forming a unity of communion between themselves."[13] Modalism was condemned by the Synod of Braga in the sixth century CE. The official statement of the synod read: "If anyone does not confess that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are three persons of one essence and virtue and power, as the catholic and apostolic church teaches, but says that [they are] a single and solitary person, in such a way that the Father is the same as the Son and this One is also the Paraclete Spirit, as Sabellius and Priscillian have said, let him be anathema."[14] Some theologians continued to hold a revised form of modalism.[15]

Tritheism: According to this view, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct gods whose relationship lies only in the divine nature they share. One way of illustrating this view is to think of three different human beings who are "one" because they share essential properties or characteristics. While modalism aimed to uphold monotheism, tritheism leans heavily towards polytheism. Tritheism intends to restore the distinctiveness of the three divine persons but in the process slips into the error of diminishing the unity of the Godhead. The majority of Christians believe they do not worship three gods but rather one God who exists in three persons. Tritheism seems to stand in direct opposition the Christian idea of monotheism.

Dynamic monarchianism: This view was most likely originated toward the end of the second century CE but exerted little influence on the early church. Dynamic monarchianism is also called *adoptionism*.[16] Like modalism, dynamic monarchianism aims to preserve an exclusivist idea of monotheism and the numerical oneness of God. Unlike modalism, dynamic

12. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 120.
13. Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 47.
14. Quoted in Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, 181–82.
15. Trau, "Modalism Revisited," 56–71.
16. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 115.

monarchianism denies that God has appeared in three modes or forms. It argues that Jesus Christ was never identical to God and claims that he was an ordinary man whom God adopted as a "Son" and empowered with God's Spirit to do good works. The view can be traced back to Theodotus, a Byzantine leather merchant,[17] who taught that prior to Jesus' baptism, he lived as an ordinary man. During his baptism, however, God's Spirit (or Christ) "descended upon him, and from that moment he worked miracles" without ceasing to be human or becoming divine.[18] This view fails to account for the divinity of Jesus Christ (see John 1:1, 14) and also fails to express the distinctiveness of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Table 4.1 Summary of the Three Theological Models

Views	Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
Modalism	There is one God who appeared in three modes.	It upholds monotheism and the identicalness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.	It fails to account for the distinctiveness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Tritheism	The Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit are three distinct Gods.	It emphasizes the distinctiveness of the three persons of the Trinity.	It denies monotheism.
Dynamic Monarchianism	There is only one God. The one God empowered Jesus (an ordinary human being) with God's Spirit to do good works.	It upholds monotheism.	It fails to account for the divinity of Jesus Christ. Also, it fails to account for the personhood of the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity and the Bible

The Trinity and the Old Testament

Is there any idea of plurality in the Old Testament (OT) concept of God? Some Christian theologians answer this question in the affirmative. They admit that a Trinitarian idea of God is more developed in the New Testament

17. Ibid., 116.
18. Ibid.

(NT) but insist that the idea was present in some books of the OT. Some argue that the Hebrew word used for God in Genesis 1:1—*Elohim*, which literally means "gods"—indicates an undeveloped idea of plurality. Also, the plural pronouns in the Genesis creation story (Gen 1) are employed by some theologians to support the idea of a plurality of being in the OT. For example, Genesis 1:26 reads, "Let *us* make man in *our* image." Many theologians and biblical scholars, however, have argued that "us" and "our" in the Genesis creation story can be understood as "plurality of majesty" or "royal plurality." Most adherents of Judaism and some Christian theologians also reject the claim that *Elohim* indicates plurality within the Godhead. On the contrary, they argue that *Elohim* describes Yahweh's uniqueness vis-à-vis other gods. Yahweh is unmatched in wisdom, power, and majesty (Isa 41:28–29; 42:17; 43:10–13). The Shema—the Jewish confession of faith—teaches exclusive monotheism and rules out the possibility of a plurality of beings within the Godhead.

For some theologians, God created all things through God's word; God spoke the world into existence. The author of Genesis used the expression "let there be" to describe this divine act. Some theologians contend that the Apostle John picked up this idea when he described Jesus as God's *logos*, a Greek word that can be translated "word" or "reason" (John 1:1, 14). Such theologians contend that *logos* is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *davar* ("word"). Other theologians argue that the Hebrew word *chokmah* ("wisdom"), which is sometimes personified (Prov 8:22–31), may be applied to Jesus Christ.[19] God's wisdom here may be construed as that which later became flesh (cf. John 1:14).

Rûaḥ (Hebrew, "wind" or "spirit"), which is used in the Old Testament to depict God's presence and power, is believed to refer to the Holy Spirit. Although the OT does not teach a Trinitarian God, some theologians continue to argue that the presence of "God," the personification of God's wisdom, and the activity of God's Spirit strongly indicate a Trinitarian idea of God.

The Trinity and the New Testament

Christian Monotheism (2 Cor 13:14)

It is clear from the NT that the followers of Christ worshiped one God—the God of the OT Jews. Yet, the Christ-devotion that permeates the worship of the NT Christians signals a paradoxical theology. If the worship of Jesus

19. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 320.

does not equate to the worship of an idol, and God is the only one who deserves to be worshipped, it follows that the NT Christians' idea of monotheism differs from the OT idea of monotheism. Larry Hurtado writes, "The Christ-devotion . . . is certainly a novel development. It is equally clearly presented as a religious stance that seeks to be faithful to the concern for the one God, and therefore it must be seen in historical terms as a distinctive variant form of monotheism."[20] Some NT texts (e.g., Rom 15:30; 2 Cor 13:14; Gal 4:4–6) sufficiently indicate that the idea of the Trinity was present in the liturgy and theology of the early church. Alister McGrath has noted that "the foundations of the doctrine of the Trinity are to be found in the pervasive pattern of divine activity to which the New Testament bears witness. The Father is revealed in Christ through the Spirit. There is the closest of connections between the Father, Son, and Spirit in the New Testament writings."[21]

Models of the Doctrine of the Trinity

FOCUS QUESTION:
How is the Trinity to be explained?

Many Christians are satisfied with their belief in the Trinity without worrying about how to explain it. They see the task of explaining the concept of the Trinity as one reserved for the theologians. Many theology students, however, are not as excited as some might think when the language of the Trinity is introduced in the lecture hall. Like everyone, they are perplexed by the doctrine many Christians consider to be essential to Christianity's identity. In its simplest form, the doctrine of the Trinity states this: *God is one-in-three* or *there is one God who exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. The difficulty with the doctrine of the Trinity derives partly from how to understand the "oneness" and the "threeness" of God. There seem to be three possible meanings of "oneness" and two possible meanings of "threeness." God's "oneness" can mean (*a*) *numerical* oneness—of being or person; (*b*) oneness of *substance* or *nature*; or (c) oneness of *purpose* or *relationship*. God's "threeness" can mean (*a*) threeness of *modes of existence* or *being*, or (b) threeness of *modes of operation*. A theologian's view of God or the Trinity will be determined by the combination of oneness and threeness the theologian prefers. For example, if a theologian combines a *numerical* oneness of being and threeness of *modes of operation*, the theologian's view of God will align with modalism.

20. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 50.
21. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 320.

In the Latin world, from the second to the fifth centuries CE, Trinitarian theologians described God as one *substantia* ("substance") and three *personae* ("persons"). Greek-speaking theologians conveyed a similar idea of God with the following Greeks words: *ousia* ("substance") and *hypostasis* ("nature" or "way of existing"). These are the main operative terms that function as an elastic boundary within which contemporary theologians expound the doctrine of the Trinity. Some theologians may see any attempt to move beyond the boundaries set by these terms as overly ambitious and dangerous. I will discuss some Trinitarian models that have operated within the bounds of the parameters set by these terms. Although some of these models intersect, they are nonetheless different in several ways. I will articulate the models in ways that highlight their understandings of the oneness of God, the threeness of God, and also their unique contribution to the discourses on the doctrine of the Trinity.

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (c. 160–c. 220 CE)

Many students of theology are unaware that Africa was the home of prominent theologians who shaped the theological conversation during the third, fourth, and fifth centuries CE. Tertullian (Tertullianus) was an African lawyer and theologian. He was born in the province of Roman North Africa in a place that corresponds roughly to the present-day Tunisia. He was trained in the catechetical school of Carthage. Later in his life he is thought to have become a Montanist.[22] It is most likely that the Montanists' zeal for morality and holy living strongly appealed to Tertullian. Some theologians believe that his encounter with Montanism helped him move away from a binitarian view of God to a Trinitarian view of God.[23]

Tertullian made some significant contributions to Christian Trinitarian discourse. For example, although the idea of the Trinity appeared in the writings of other early theologians, such as Justin Martyr (died in c. 165 CE), Tertullian was the first theologian to use the Latin words *trinitas* ("trinity"), *personae*, and *substantia* to describe the relationship that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He developed these concepts in his book *Against Praxeas*. He most probably coined the Latin phrase *una substantia, tres personae* ("one substance, three persons"). Gregg Allison notes that "Tertullian's wording became the foundation for the church's definition of the Trinity: God is one essence or substance yet three in persons."[24]

22. For further discussion of Montanism, see chapter 6.
23. Pelikan, "Montanism and Its Trinitarian Significance," 109.
24. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 237.

Tertullian's view of the Trinity was an attack on modalism and dynamic monarchianism. He followed the Trinitarian interpretation that construes God as *one divine nature, three distinct and graded persons*. For him, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a unity because they share the same divine substance (*substantia*). He used the word *trinitas* to describe both the plurality and unity within the Godhead. It is not readily clear how he intended *personae* to be understood in the context of the Trinity. For Tertullian, the Father (the source of divine being), the Son, and the Holy Spirit participate in and share the same divine nature or substance. Some contemporary interpreters have categorized Tertullian and some other Western theologians of the patristic era as those who explained the unity of the Godhead in terms of substance or substance ontology and not relational ontology.

In the ancient Greek world, *prosopon* ("person") originally meant "face" or "the part of the head that is 'below the cranium.'"[25] It later took on other meanings, such as "the mask held up before the face of Greek actors," a character in a drama or plan and also "the bearer of that character, the particular individual concerned."[26] The ancient Latin word *persona* ("person") has the capacity for several meanings. Most commonly, it refers both to a mask worn by an actor in a play and the actual character itself.[27] In the English language, the word *person* can be used in several senses, including a human being, a character in a play, and one recognized by law as the subject of rights and duties (which could be a corporation or a human being).[28] Theologians continue to debate the actual meaning of *person* in Trinitarian thought. Some have suggested that the term be replaced with another that has a more limited meaning.

In *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian employed the word *persona* to accomplish two interrelated theological purposes: to preserve the individuality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to highlight the nature of their relationship and oneness. He used *persons* to distinguish Jesus Christ (God the Son) from God the Father and the Holy Spirit. For him, the words *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* are not merely names for different appearances of God. It is most likely that he intended *persons*, in this context, to be understood as the individual characters that play active roles in the drama of salvation. These three divine characters share one divine *substantia*. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are real "individuals" who are numerically distinct, with different roles in the economy of salvation. He writes, "This economy arranges

25. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 31.
26. Brown, "Trinitarian Personhood and Individuality," 51.
27. Porter, "On Keeping 'Persons' in the Trinity," 531.
28. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. "person."

unity in trinity, regulating three, Father, Son and Spirit—three, however, not in unchangeable condition, but in rank; not in substance, but in attitude; not in office, but in appearance;—but of one nature [*substantia*] and of one reality and of one power, because there is one God from whom these ranks and attitudes and appearances are derived in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit."[29] Tertullian sees Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three distinct expressions, grades, and manifestations of one divine substance or God-nature. They are divine because they derive from one divine nature. To paraphrase Franz Dünzl, as a spring, a river, and a canal are distinct, yet share one nature—namely, water—so the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct and interrelated divine entities that possess one divine nature.

For Tertullian, the Father is the source from whom the Son and the Holy Spirit derive. This does not mean that the Son and the Holy Spirit are by nature inferior to God. He writes that "we . . . 'believe' indeed 'in one God,' but subject to this arrangement, which we call economy, that to the one God there should also belong a Son, His own Word, who has come from Him . . . ; that it was He [the Son] who was put by the Father into 'the virgin,' and 'born from' her, both man and God . . . who afterwards, according to His promise, sent from the Father the Holy 'Spirit, Paraclete,' the sanctifier of the faith of them who believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."[30] In the *economy* (the ordered roles) of salvation, the three divine persons who are manifestations of a single indivisible power or divine nature perform different functions in restoring humanity and the whole of God's creation to divine fellowship. As Dünzl puts it, "Like the spring, the Father is the inexhaustible origin of the deity; and just as the river rises from the spring, so the Son comes forth from the Father and brings salvation to human beings; and just as the water is distributed over the fields by canals, so the Holy Spirit is distributed to believers in baptism and makes them fruitful."[31] Tertullian's theology of the Trinity can be summarized thus: the *self-existent divine nature* first expressed the divine self in the person of the Father from whom the Son and the Holy Spirit derive their existence.

Critics of Tertullian's view of the Trinity point out that it could lead to the idea of a fourth "thing" or "character" in the Trinity. If the the self-existent divine nature constitutes the ontological unity and oneness of the three persons of the Trinity, and we are not to accept tritheism, it follows that the self-existent divine nature can be distinguished from *its* three "graded"

29. Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 30.

30. Ibid., 28.

31. Dünzl, *Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church*, 32.

modes of being—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The self-existent divine nature seems to constitute the fourth "thing" in the Trinity.

The following excerpt captures Tertullian's understanding of the ontology, relationship, and roles of the three persons of the Trinity.

> But amongst us it is only the "Son that knows the Father," and He Himself "has revealed the bosom of the Father" and "He has heard" and "seen" all things with the Father and "what things He was commanded by the Father, these He also speaks"; and it was "not His own will, but" the Father's that He accomplished, that will which He knew at close quarters, nay from His inmost soul. "For who knows what is in God but the Spirit who is in Himself?" The word, moreover, is equipped with the spirit, and if I may say so, the word's body is spirit. The word, therefore, was both always in the Father, even as He says: "I in the Father," and always with God, as it is written: "And the Word was with God," and never separated from the Father or different from the Father, because: "I and the Father are one." This will be the projection of truth, the guardian of unity, by which we say that the Son was brought forth from the Father, but not separated. For God brought forth the Word, even as the Paraclete also teaches, as the root does the shrub, the source the river, and the sun the ray. For these forms too are projections of the natures from which they proceed. Nor should I hesitate to call the Son both the shrub of the root and the river of the source and the ray of the sun, because every origin is a parent, and all that is brought forth from the origin is offspring, much more the Word of God, which also in a real sense received the name of Son. And yet the shrub is not distinguished from the root, nor the river from the source, nor the ray from the sun, even as the Word is not distinguished from God either. Therefore according to the pattern of these examples I declare that I speak of two, God and His Word, the Father and His Son. . . . Where, however, there is a second, there are two, and where there is a third, there are three. The Spirit is third with respect to God and the Son, even as the fruit from the shrub is third from the root, and the channel from the river is third from the source, and the point where the ray strikes something is third from the sun. Yet in no respect is it banished from the original source from which it derives it special qualities. Thus the Trinity running down from the Father through stages linked and united together, offers no obstacle to monarchy and conserves the established position of the economy.
>
> Everywhere remember that I have mentioned that Father and Son and Spirit are unseparated from one another, and thus you will recognize what is meant and how it is meant. Understand then; I say that the Father is one, the Son is another and the Spirit another—every untrained or perverse person

takes this saying wrongly, as if it expressed difference, and as the result of difference meant a separation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; but it is of necessity that I say this, when they contend that Father, Son, and Spirit are the same person, fawning on monarchy at the expense of economy—but that it is not by difference that the Son is other than the Father, but by distribution, and it not by division that He is other, but by distinction, because the Father and Son are not the same, being different one form the other even in measure. For the Father is all being, but the Son is a tributary of the whole and a portion, as He Himself declares, "Because the Father is greater than I."[32]

Question: In what ways does Tertullian explain the unity and individuality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

John Zizioulas

No theologian since the late twentieth century has given better expression to Eastern Orthodox views on the doctrine of the Trinity than Bishop John Zizioulas. His vast knowledge of both the Western and Eastern traditions sets him apart from other Greek theologians. Following the Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa—Zizioulas aimed to reposition *personal relationship* as the most adequate way of conceiving of the being of God. He writes, "The substance of God, 'God,' has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion."[33] This means that God's "threeness is just as primary as oneness; diversity is constitutive of unity."[34]

Zizioulas' concerns in *Being as Communion* were the communal and relational mode of existence of God and the church. He rejects Tertullian's view of *person* for its lack of ontological content. For him, Tertullian's view moved in the direction of Sabellianism or modalism.[35] He contends that Christianity, particularly its expression in the ancient Greek-speaking church, developed the concept of person in a way that united the *person* with the *being* of an individual human being. In other words, the *hypostasis* ("essence") of a human being was identified with the *prosopon* ("person").[36]

32 Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 43–46.

33. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17.

34. Zizioulas, "Relational Ontology," 148.

35. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 37.

36. Ibid., 35–36.

This revolutionary understanding of the person moved away from seeing a *person* as "an adjunct to a being (a kind of mask)" to conceiving of the *person* as that which "becomes the being itself and is simultaneously—a most significant point—the constitutive element (the 'principle' or 'cause') of beings."[37] For Zizioulas, Western (Latin-speaking) theologians located the oneness of God or the unity of the Trinity "in one divine substance, the one divinity." In contrast, Eastern (Greek-speaking) theologians located "the unity of God, the one God, and the ontological 'principle' or 'cause' of the being and life of God" in "*hypostasis*, that is, *the person of the Father*. The one God is not the one substance but the Father, who is the 'cause' both of the generation of the Son and of the procession of the Spirit."[38] How does the Cappadocian Fathers' theology of the Trinity avert tritheism—the existence of three distinct and separate gods who are one because they share a common substance? Zizioulas answers thus: "The Cappadocian Fathers said that the analogy of one human nature exemplified by a multitude of distinct persons could indeed be applied to God, provided that we do not include time and space, and therefore separatedness and mortality, in the analogy. With this condition the question of three different gods disappears."[39]

Zizioulas founds his view of the Trinity on *the ontology of communion*. For him, "there is no being without communion"; this communion derives from the *hypostasis*, which he defines as "a concrete and free person."[40] He identifies the *being* of an individual with the *person* of the individual. He writes, "The person cannot exist without communion; but every form of communion which denies or suppresses the person, is inadmissible."[41] God is a being in communion of three *hypostases* ("persons"). To him, "The being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God. . . . It would be unthinkable to speak of the 'one God' before speaking of the God who is 'communion,' that is to say, of the Holy Trinity."[42] The ground of God's ontology does not lie simply in God's *ousia* ("nature"—that is, uncreated being), but rather in *hypostasis* or personal existence.[43] He distinguishes *ousia* ("nature") from *hypostasis* (essence) and also identifies *hypostasis* with *person* (concrete existence).

37. Ibid., 39.
38. Ibid., 40–41.
39. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, 51.
40. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 18.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 17.
43. Ibid., 44.

Zizioulas' understanding of the Trinity may be summarized as follows: God (the person of the Father) exists; the Father out of love "freely begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit."[44] It is the Father who wills the Trinitarian communion.[45] Love, Zizioulas argues, is the only exercise of freedom in an ontological manner. This ontological freedom is rooted in God's being or mode of existence: "God is love" (1 John 4:16).[46] Understanding God in terms of love, according to Kallistos Ware, is to say that God exists not for self but for the other. Ware argues that "love," as a theological analogy, presents God as an interpersonal being who exists in communion.[47] But Zizioulas and Ware, following the Cappadocian Fathers, imagine the unity of God or oneness of the Trinity in personalist terms, that is, "a unity established through the interrelationship or *koinonia* of the three divine subjects."[48] Both theologians ground the unity of God in terms of relational ontology and not metaphysical or substance ontology.

In his critique of relational ontology, particularly Zizioulas' version, Lewis Ayres rejects the claim that "'relationship' can function as a useful general descriptor of being—divine, human, and non-human."[49] On the contrary, Ayres argues that "the Father as divine person eternally gives rise to the unique divine being that cannot be reduced to 'person' as a category more basic than the union of the three."[50]

The excerpt below captures Zizioulas' understanding of the oneness and threeness of God.

> In God . . . it is not divine nature that is the origin of the divine persons. It is the person of the Father that "causes" God to exist as Trinity. However, "Father" has no meaning outside a relationship with the Son and the Spirit, for he is the Father *of* someone. This plurality and interdependence of the persons is the basis of a new ontology. The one essence is not the origin or cause of the being of God. It is the person of the Father that is the ultimate agent, but since "Father" implies communion he cannot be understood as a being in isolation. Personal communion lies at the very heart of divine being.

44. Ibid., 41.
45. Ibid., 44.
46. Ibid., 46.
47. Ware, "Holy Trinity," 113–14.
48. Ibid., 114.
49. Ayres, "(Mis)Adventures in Trinitarian Ontology," 132.
50. Ibid., 133.

Now we are in a better position to understand the expression "God is love." Christianity did not invent the notion that God is love. Plato believed that God is love, in the sense that love is a flow of the divine nature, a flow as involuntary as the overflowing of a cup or a crater. The Church rejected this conception of love as involuntary emotion or passion, and insisted instead that the phrase "God is love" means that God is constituted by these personal relationships. God is communion: love is fundamental to his being, not an addition to it. Because it is directly related to the doctrine of the Trinity, this point has to be given a great deal of clarification.

It is perhaps our usual assumption that we exist first, and then that we love. However, let us imagine that our existence depends on our relationship with those we love. Our being derives from our relationship with those we love, and if they cease to love us, we disappear. Love is this communion of relationships which give us our existence. Only love can continue to sustain us when all the material threads of life are broken and we are without any other support. If these threads are not reconnected we cease to exist; death is the snapping of the last thread. Love, or communion with other persons, is stronger than death and is the source of our existence. That "God is love" means that God is the communion of this Holy Trinity. God the Father would lose his identity and being if he did not have the Son, and the same applies to the Son and to the Spirit. If we took away the communion of the Trinity to make God a unit, God would not be communion and therefore would not be love.

It is easy to assume that God is love because he loves the world, but the world did not always exist. God did not *become* love because he loves the world, for this would imply that he became love when the world came into existence. But God is absolutely transcendent, his existence is utterly independent of the world. God is love in his being. It is not however himself that he loves, so this is not self-love. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit, the Son loves the Father and the Spirit, the Spirit loves the Father and the Son: it is another person that each loves. It is the person, not the nature or essence, who loves, and the one he loves is also a person. Because this divine love is a matter of personal communion, this love is free: each person loved is free to respond to this love with love.

Our question was whether it is the substance or the person that is most fundamental, in God. We have seen that, in God, essence and person are co-fundamental, neither is prior to the other.[51]

Question: How does Zizioulas define the oneness and threeness of God, and how does his view differ from Tertullian's view of the Trinity?

51. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, 53–54.

Catherine Mowry LaCugna

On the doctrine of the Trinity, Catherine LaCugna (1952–1997), a Roman Catholic theologian, stands very close to the Cappadocian Fathers and John Zizioulas. According to LaCugna, "the acts of God *in history* (and not ontology) were the original subject matter of Trinitarian theology."[52] She moves away from a speculative theology that aims to describe God apart from God's salvific action in the work and activity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. She argues that the doctrine of the Trinity should not be construed as "a new way to explain 'God's inner life,' that is, the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to one another (what tradition refers to as the immanent Trinity)."[53] Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity should be seen as "a way to explain the place of Christ in our salvation, the place of the Spirit in our sanctification or deification, and in so doing to say something about the mystery of God's eternal being."[54] LaCugna is hesitant to discuss the doctrine of the Trinity from the perspective of the *immanent Trinity* (God's inner life) in exclusion from or prior to the *economic Trinity* (the activities of the three persons of the Trinity in salvation history).[55] For her, immanent Trinity cannot be separated from economic Trinity—God's way of existing and relating to the world through the work of Jesus Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit. God is "who and what God is by having a history, both 'internally' [immanent Trinity] and 'externally' [economic Trinity]."[56]

LaCugna argues that Christian theology ought not to concern itself with "predicating attributes (wisdom, or even love) indifferently of 'deity in general.'"[57] On the contrary, Christian theology should ask "who this God is, who acts in this history, with these people."[58] LaCugna applauds Augustine and other theologians (who argued that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share a single, previously existing divine essence or substance) for destroying *Arianism*—the view that argued that Jesus Christ did not have the same substance as God the Father.[59] However, she claims that the price of the victory over Arianism was that the doctrine of the Trinity "came to

52. LaCugna, "Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity," 173. Emphasis LaCugna's.

53. LaCugna, "Practical Trinity," 678.

54. Ibid.

55. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 6–7.

56. LaCugna, "Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity," 173.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid., 174.

be viewed only as a speculative and purely formal doctrine" and as a result "was detached from ordinary Christian life (liturgy, prayer)."[60]

One of LaCugna's major contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity is the rediscovery of its relation to the rest of Christian doctrine, particularly the Christian life. In *God for Us*: *The Trinity and Christian Life*, LaCugna argues that the doctrine of the Trinity should be at the center of, and also the source for, reflection on all aspects of Christian doctrine. To her, the Trinity should not be about the esoteric "inner life" of God.[61] She proposes an approach to the doctrine of the Trinity that will "root all speculation about the triune nature of God in the economy of salvation (*oikonomia*), in the self-communication of God in the person of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit."[62] This approach is grounded on her understanding of the relationship between *theologia*—the mystery of God's inner life—and *oikonomia*—God's providential will manifested in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of human salvation.[63] In this approach, as she sees it, *oikonomia* is the most appropriate way of entering into the mystery of God's inner life. In other words, our only access to God's inner being and life is through God's manifestations of God's self as triune. She writes, "We can make true statements about God—particularly when the assertions are about the triune nature of God—only on the basis of the economy [*oikonomia*], corroborated by God's self-revelation in Christ and the Spirit. *Theological* statements are possible not because we have some independent insights into God, or can speak from the standpoint of God, but because God has freely revealed and communicated God's self, God's personal existence, God's infinite mystery."[64]

For LaCugna, "God exists eternally as Father, Son, Spirit," and therefore God is in God's being communal.[65] Like Zizioulas, LaCugna argues that the essence of God is relational: "God exists as diverse persons united in a communion of freedom, love, and knowledge."[66] The personhood (*hypostasis*) of God is not an addition to God's being (*ousia*).[67] Therefore, God's nature and being cannot be successfully imagined and described in isolation from God's personhood. As LaCugna puts it, "God exists always

60. Ibid.
61. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 2.
62. Ibid.
63. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 3–4.
64. Ibid., 2–3.
65. Ibid., 23.
66. Ibid., 243.
67. Ibid., 244.

concretely, existentially, in persons. No substance, especially the divine substance, is self-contained or exists without reference to another."[68] As should be expected, she favors *relational ontology* (the understanding of "being" as being-in-relation or being-in-personhood), considering it the only viable way to "avert the separation of *theologia* and *oikonomia*."[69]

To LaCugna, the Trinity, "which is the specifically Christian way of speaking about God," is ultimately a "practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life."[70] The doctrine of the Trinity is the Christian explanation of the encounter between "divine and human persons in the economy of redemption."[71] In God's revelation of God's self as triune, God invites humanity into divine fellowship, making human beings "intimate partakers of the living God."[72] The divine and human personhood intersects in the economy that proceeds from God the Father "through Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit."[73] The doctrine of the Trinity, properly understood, is the Christian way of articulating both God's self-revelation as a being-in-relation and God's invitation of humanity into the divine life of fellowship, which impacts the relationship of human beings to God and to one another. She writes, "The heart of Christian faith is the encounter with the God of Jesus Christ who makes possible both our union with God and communion with each other. In this encounter, God invites people to share in divine life and grace through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit; at the same time, we are called to live in new relationship with one other, as we are gathered together by the Spirit into the body of Christ."[74] For her, God does not exist as triune merely for God's sake or God's self but rather for us. She contends that a doctrine of the Trinity ought to be soteriological—that is, it should be concerned with God's providential care and salvation for God's creation.

Some theologians have criticized LaCugna for emphasizing the economic Trinity at the expense of the immanent Trinity.[75] The primary issue here is God's freedom to exist and also God's capacity for relationship independent of God's relationship and mode of existence in the world. LaCugna is aware of this issue and seeks to resolve it by arguing that "salvation his-

68. Ibid., 246.
69. Ibid.
70. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 1.
71. Ibid., 243.
72. Ibid., 3.
73. Ibid., 246.
74. LaCugna, "Practical Trinity," 679.
75. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 158–62; Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 187–93.

tory is one mode of the divine self-communication."[76] She continues, "The incomprehensible and ineffable mystery of God is not diminished by God's self-expression in the history of salvation. Nonetheless, because of the unity of *theologia* and *oikonomia*, the specific details of God's self-revelation in Christ and the Spirit reveal God's nature [and inner life]."[77] Some theologians find her resolution unsatisfactory because she does not make a clear distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. Her understanding of the unity of *theologia* and *oikonomia* appears to collapse "God into the economy of salvation."[78]

Current discussions in trinitarian theology usually are structured by the distinction between the "economic" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity. There is wide agreement in [Roman] Catholic and Protestant theology with [Karl] Rahner's principle that "The 'economic' Trinity *is* the 'immanent' Trinity, and vice versa."

The terms "economic Trinity" and "immanent Trinity" are ways of speaking about the life and work of God. The phrase "economic Trinity" refers to the three "faces" or manifestations of God's activity in the world, correlated with the names, Father, Son, and Spirit. In particular, economic Trinity denotes the missions, the being sent by God, of Son and Spirit in the work of redemption and deification. These missions bring about communion between God and humankind.

The phrase "immanent Trinity," also called the "essential" Trinity, points to the life and work of God in the economy, but from an "immanent" point of view. The word "immanent" has at least two meanings. First, "immanent" means *near* or *present*, as in "God is immanent to the world." In this first sense it is used as the opposite of "transcendent," which means that God is unrestricted by the conditions of finite existence. Second, immanent means *interior* or *inherent*, as in, "the immanent activities of knowing and loving." The latter is the meaning intended by the phrase "immanent Trinity." Thus, "immanent Trinity" refers to the reciprocal relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit *to each other*, considered apart from God's activity in the world. In Rahner's theology, which presupposes that God is by nature *self*-communicating, the immanent Trinity is the "intradivine" self-communication: Father to Son and Spirit. The economic Trinity is the historical manifestation of that eternal self-communication in the missions of Jesus Christ and the Spirit. The identity

76. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 221.

77. Ibid.

78. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 160. See also Leslie, "Does God Have a Life?," 391–98. Leslie argues that this is an error in LaCugna's doctrine of the Trinity.

of the economic and immanent Trinity therefore means that what God has revealed and given in Christ and the Spirit is the reality of God as God is from all eternity. What is given in the economy of salvation, in other words, is the mystery of God which exists from all eternity as triune. But the distinction between economic and immanent Trinity is strictly conceptual, not ontological. There are not two trinities, the Trinity of experience and transeconomic. There is one God, one divine self-communication, manifested in the one economy of creation, redemption, and consummation. . . .

The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life. Because of the essential unity of *theologia* and *oikonomia*, the subject matter of the doctrine of the Trinity is the shared life between God and creature. . . .

According to the doctrine of the Trinity, God lives as the mystery of love among persons. If we are created in the image of this God, and if our destiny is to live forever with this God and with God's beloved creatures, then what forms of life best enable us to live as Christ lived, to show forth the Spirit of God, and ultimately to be deified? These questions are best answered in light of what is revealed of God's life in Jesus Christ.[79]

Question: How does LaCugna's doctrine of the Trinity explain the relationship between immanent Trinity and economic Trinity?

Theological Implications of the Doctrine of the Trinity

It is one thing to explain what Christians mean when they confess that God is Trinity. It is another thing to draw out what the doctrine of the Trinity means for Christians. The doctrine of the Trinity should not be seen as a theological idea that has no direct bearing on how Christians ought to speak about God and humanity, and also how they ought to live. Despite the difficulty associated with the doctrine of the Trinity, it remains the unique Christian way of interpreting and appropriating God's acts in enacting and sustaining a relationship with God's creation. The theological consequences of confessing that God is triune are enormous. I will highlight only two.

God's Transcendence and Immanence

Confessing that God is Trinity entails that God is *different from* humanity, on the one hand, and is *one with* humanity, on the other hand (Jer 23:24; Isa

79. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 211–12, 377–78.

55:8–9; Acts 17:27–28; 1 Cor 2:10–16). The words *transcendence* and *immanence* are used in theology to convey this understanding of God. To say that God is transcendent is to acknowledge God's *otherness*—God is not bound by or limited to what God has created. God must be distinguished from the world. As a result, God "goes beyond our categories of understanding."[80] Human beings, given their finitude, may know God only when God reveals God's self to them. Christianity, as we saw in chapter 2, teaches that God has revealed God's self in a manner that human beings can know. Regarding God's immanence, to say that God is immanent is to acknowledge that God has revealed God's self to humanity, acts "within nature, human nature, and history," and sustains the world.[81] Even though God has revealed God's self in human history, human talk about God cannot encapsulate the totality of God's acts. Such talk about God (theology) will always fall short of the mystery and transcendence of God. This does not mean that human beings cannot come to adequate and sufficient knowledge of God—they can do so because of God's self-revelation. It is rather that no theology can exhaust the mystery of God.

God's transcendence in some ways presupposes God's life within God's self prior to God's act of creating or bringing the world into existence. Theologians call this life of God *ontological Trinity* (or *immanent Trinity*). God's immanence presupposes God's self-disclosure to humanity, particularly for the purpose of salvation. Some theologians have dubbed this activity of God the *economic Trinity*. The Bible does not give extensive details about the kind of life and fellowship the Trinitarian God enjoyed prior to creating the world. While some theologians contend it is possible to distinguish "God-in-eternity" (ontological or immanent Trinity) and "God-in-revelation" (economic Trinity),[82] others argue that such distinction is unattainable and contend that "the reality of God which encounters us in His revelation is His reality in all the depths of eternity."[83]

The closest the Bible comes to saying something about the inner life of God is 1 John 4:7–21. In verses 8 and 16 John tells us that "God is love." He goes on to say that God has demonstrated this life of love by becoming a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. The purpose of this divine act is so that human beings can relate to God in and through God's son, Jesus Christ (1 John 4:9–21). In this text, God's relational nature is the focal point. John Zizioulas has noted that John's words, "God is love," signify that God exists as "person

80. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 273.
81. Ibid., 329.
82. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Trune God*, 55.
83. Barth, *CD* 1/1, 479.

not substance. Love is not an emanation or 'property' of the substance of God. . . . [I]t is that which makes God what He is, the one God."[84]

Karl Rahner's rule—"The 'economic Trinity' *is* the 'immanent Trinity' and the 'immanent Trinity' is the 'economic Trinity'"—is highly informative.[85] Rahner's aim is to show that God's self-revelation occurs only in a salvific context—God's act of reconciling fallen creation to God's self. Catherine LaCugna concurs: "Both immanence and transcendence must be predicated not just of *theologia* [theology or the mystery of God] but *oikonomia* [economy or fellowship]: God's mystery is grasped as transcendent precisely in the economy of salvation. Vice versa, the economic self-revelation of God in Christ is grasped, albeit obliquely, as the mystery of *theologia* itself."[86] Love—the nature of God—is the grounds of both God's existence as a community of three persons and also God's self-disclosure. Therefore, any distinction made between the ontological or immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity is unhelpful and misleading.

Discussing God's transcendence and immanence in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity also points to God's self-disclosure. While it is possible that upon reflection the created order may lead us to ponder the existence of God and God's power and sovereignty, it is only in the event of Jesus Christ that we encounter God's self-revelation. Jesus Christ, in an unprecedented way, bridges the gulf between God's transcendence and immanence. His divinity and humanity allow him to accomplish this enormous task.[87] Revelation is *personal*. As I said in chapter 2, this is the pinnacle of God's self-disclosure in human history. It takes one to reveal oneself. For example, a dad may be able to know something about his son that people who are not close to his son do not know. But it is still possible for the dad, however close he is to his son, not to know some things that his son has not disclosed to him. It takes God to reveal God's self. Many Christians believe that God has revealed God's self in Jesus Christ. Since Jesus Christ is God (as expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity), it makes sense to posit that he effectively reveals God to humanity (John 14:9–14; Col 2:9; Heb 1:3).

God's Relational Nature and Human Personhood

Doing theology from a Trinitarian outlook, argues Paul Louis Metzger, is not a "restatement" of the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, "Trinitarian

84. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 46.

85. Rahner, *Trinity*, 22.

86. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 322.

87. For discussion of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, see chapter 5.

theology frames consideration of divine and human being in interpersonal, communal terms, and views this interpersonal God as first in the order of being and knowing, with all this shift implies for human concepts, language and culture."[88] However, the relational approach to the Trinity does not sit well with some theologians who want to retain the metaphysical (or substance) ontology that has been the standard way of understanding the unity of God in the Western tradition.[89] Others have pointed out that it is misleading to assume that all Western theologians, particularly in the patristic era, focused on the primacy of substance and undermined the relational nature of God.[90]

Not only does the Trinity tell us something about the nature of God, but it also tells us something about the nature of human beings. Individualism and the pull toward self-love or isolation is a grave threat to human personhood. The doctrine of the Trinity can rescue us from this predicament. To be a person is to be an "other" in relation to "others." Analogically, as no person of the Trinity exists in fullness in isolation, no single individual human being can achieve his or her full potential in isolation. This mutual relationship among the persons of the Trinity is expressed with the word *perichoresis*. Jürgen Moltmann defines *perichoresis* as "a reciprocal indwelling."[91] He writes, "If we understand the divine life perichoretically, it cannot be realized by a single subject alone, and cannot be thought without the three divine Persons. Their shared nature, their shared consciousness and their shared will is formed intersubjectively through their specific personhood in each case, by their specific consciousness in each case, and by their own will in each case. The Father becomes conscious of himself by being conscious of the Son, and so forth."[92]

Carol Barry has noted that "the Trinity is the ultimate paradigm of all our personal relationships: in the sincere gift of ourselves to and for the other we discover our true selves. God is not solitary; hence we are not created to be solitary. We are called to communion with ourselves, others and God."[93] Contemporary European and North American forms of Christianity need to listen to the communitarian voices sounding from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Several Western theologians have already heeded to this call. But individualism continues to impede the acceptance of community as

88. Metzger, "Introduction," 7.
89. Ayres, "(Mis)Adventures in Trinitarian Ontology," 130.
90. Ibid., 134–35.
91. Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 322.
92. Ibid., 322.
93. Barry, "Trinity," 116.

what ought to precede and shape the individual. In the indigenous culture of sub-Saharan Africa, an individual exists and derives his or her meaning and relevance only in relation to his or her community. This African notion of community is helpful for reimagining both the doctrines of the Trinity and church.

The greatest challenge of the present-day church (the community of all believers who confess the lordship of Jesus Christ) is not coming to terms with the global face of Christianity, but rather *living globally*—that is, coming to a full recognition that no single Christian community can achieve its full potential (morally, theologically, intellectually, or otherwise) in isolation from other Christians communities around the world. In order for the church to make any meaningful progress in achieving its goal as the "body of Christ," each local Christian community must be willing to learn from other communities; each community must learn to participate in the pain, suffering, joy, theological reflection, and worship of other Christian communities.

Concluding Reflections

In spite of the difficulty of conceptualizing the doctrine of the Trinity, it remains the distinctive concept of God that Christianity offers to the world. Rather than dwelling on its difficulty, it would be wise to concentrate on the unique things the doctrine of the Trinity tells us about God, ourselves, and the world at large. Perhaps in no other Christian doctrine does human finitude and limitation come face to face with the mystery of God. But it is precisely the mystery of God that brings us to our human condition—as creatures of God whose existence and meaning depend entirely on God. Given this condition, "we must expect that our frail, sinful, and limited human capacity to reason will be severely tested when trying to accommodate itself to the divine reality."[94]

In the end, the Trinity only approximately expresses the identity and work of God. The Trinity ought not to be the last "name" Christians give to God or the only way they describe the mystery of God's life and work. There are several reasons for this claim. I will state only two. First, our changing experience and contexts should reflect our understanding, imagination, and description of God. The feminist critique of the traditional description of the Trinity and the insistence on renaming the persons of the Trinity—calling them Creator, Liberator, and Advocate, for example, instead of Father, Son, and Spirit—is a reminder that the use of masculine language for God

94. McGrath, "Doctrine of the Trinity," 19.

cannot be countenanced.[95] If masculine language for God continues to be at the root of women's exclusion and oppression, then such language has fallen short of the glory of God and should be dropped or revised. Second, theologians face the challenge of describing God in ways that Christians with no formal theological training can easily identify and use in preaching and living out the good news of God's work in the world in and through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Anyone who truly understands the doctrine of the Trinity will witness to its immense difficulty and complexity. The unique and most meaningful name Christians give to God need not be too difficult to comprehend. The name should not be left only to professional theologians and people with formal theological training to describe.

Key Terms

Dynamic Monarchianism: the view that construes God as a king who adopted Jesus as a "Son" and endowed him with God's Spirit to do good works.

Economic Trinity: the "ordered" roles of the three persons of the Trinity in salvation history.

Immanence: when used for God, refers to God's interaction with and actions within God's creation.

Immanent Trinity: the "inner" life of fellowship of the three persons of the Trinity.

Modalism: the view that construes God as a single actor who appeared in three different "masks," namely, "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit."

Perichoresis: a term used to express the mutual sharing in the life and acts of the three persons of the Trinity.

Transcendence: when used for God, refers to the *otherness* of God or the belief that God is ontologically different from God's creation.

Tritheism: the view that construes God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit as three distinct Gods.

95. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 210.

Review Questions

1. What are the "economic Trinity" and the "immanent Trinity"? How do they relate and how do they differ?
2. What are the theological implications of the doctrine of the Trinity?
3. What are the differences in the doctrine of the Trinity articulated by Tertullian, Zizioulas, and LaCugna?

Suggestion for Further Reading

Boff, Leonardo. *Trinity and Society*. Translated by Paul Burns. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.

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