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WAYS OF DESCRIBING THE HOLY TRINITY

Peter Toon

When I think of any One of the Three I think of him as a whole, and my vision is filled, and the greater part of what I conceive escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of that One so as to attribute a greater greatness to others. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one luminary, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light.

GREGORY NAZIANZEN, ORATIO 40.41

It is due to the communion in power between himself and the heavenly Father that the Son is himself the Author of saving benefits, so that actual knowledge of him is unquestionably more certain and solid than any idle speculations. For in him the godly mind discerns God as very present, and almost handles him when it feels itself quickened, enlightened, saved, justified and sanctified.

JOHN CALVIN, INSTITUTES, 1:13.13

In this article I want to distinguish distinctions between three ways of speaking of the Lord who is "The Trinity." These are the biblical presentation(s) of God as a unity in plurality; the church dogma of God as the "immanent" Trinity and the teaching of theologians of God as the "economic" Trinity.

By the biblical presentation/doctrine(s) I mean that which is taught in the books of the Bible and specifically the books of the New Testament. This takes a variety of forms and is essentially functional in nature.

By the "immanent" Trinity I mean the Trinity remaining within itself; that is, God as he is unto himself; or the three persons as they are unto themselves within the unity of the Godhead. Here God is considered in total isolation apart from both creation and the divine plan of salvation, the *oikonomia*. (It is important that we do not confuse the doctrine of the immanence of God in creation with the doctrine of the "immanent" Trinity. The former speaks of God, who is transcendent, being present in and through his creation, while the latter speaks of God as God is in and unto and for himself in his own being, infinity and eternity.)

By the "economic" Trinity I mean the Trinity in relation to the *oikonomia*; or the sending by the Father of the Son (our Lord Jesus Christ) into the world for our salvation and of the sending of the Holy Ghost (also the Spirit of Christ) to the church for its sanctification and empowering. The

"economic" Trinity is not to be equated with the biblical doctrine(s) of the Trinity for the former is logically dependent upon the concept of the "immanent" Trinity.

While the conceptual distinction between the "immanent" and "economic" Trinity goes back a long way, these two expressions and the formal distinction between them came into use only in relatively modern times.¹

There is of course one and only one God who is the Holy Trinity but there are a variety of ways of speaking of this one God who is a unity in Trinity and a Trinity in unity. We need to keep this in mind as we proceed.

The indispensable starting point for any study of and reflection upon the Christian experience and knowledge of God as a plurality in unity must always be the Bible. There is no other place to start. However, to remain in the Bible and not to take account of the results of godly study and determination by the church in history would be foolish. The method that makes best sense both of the historical experience of the church and of the structure of human knowing is for us to move from the reading and study of the Bible, to the study of the church dogma of the "immanent" Trinity and from there back to the Bible, which is now read and seen in the light of the church dogma. The result is the formation of the "economic" Trinity, that is doctrine which is teachable and preachable and has practical consequences for the life of the church and of each Christian therein.²

To introduce this approach I want to begin in a way that may be judged by some as odd. Yet I think it is a fruitful way. I take a look at the way in which the *King James Version of the Bible* (1611) and *The Book of Common Prayer* (1549; 1552; 1559; 1662) speak of the One whom we call the Third Person of the Holy Trinity—the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit. This will introduce us via biblical translation and liturgical forms to the distinction in concept and speech between the biblical, "economic" and "immanent"

doctrines of the Trinity during the Protestant Reformation.

THE HOLY GHOST AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

I want to make the extraordinary claim (to modern ears) that to do justice to the identity of the third person of the Holy Trinity in Christian discourse, especially in Bible translation, public liturgy, hymnody and theology, the English Reformers and biblical translators of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the need to use both expressions, "the Holy Ghost" and "the [Holy] Spirit."

Of course I am much aware that since the 1960s there has been a determined move on virtually all fronts—Roman Catholic and Protestant, liturgical and devotional—to eliminate the use of the name, "the Holy Ghost," from all Christian discourse. Thus "the Holy Spirit" and "the Spirit" and "the Spirit of God" are the only expressions currently used to translate *Pneuma hagion* and *sanctus Spiritus* or to speak of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. It is worth noting, I think, that this movement to eliminate the use of "the Holy Ghost" has occurred at the same time as the change from "Thee/Thou" to "You" with reference to God in theology, public liturgy, hymnody, and Bible translation has also been accomplished.

The basic reason why a Latinized word, "Spirit," has been preferred exclusively, and that an old English word "Ghost" (cf. *halig gast* in Saxon and *Geist* and *Der heilige Geist* in German) has been dropped is reasonably clear. Dominant ecclesiastical persons in both Rome and in popular evangelicalism in the 1960s judged that "ghost" was a word that was not suitable to use of the Deity. Apparently they believed that it was too much associated in popular speech with strange and weird apparitions of dead persons (cf. the ever popular phenomenon of "ghost stories" and "haunted houses").

I would observe that whatever bad associations the

word "ghost" may have in popular culture, it is nevertheless a word that invariably has reference to a real person (even if he/she is dead!). In contrast, the word "spirit" does not always carry with it a definite personal reference. In fact "spirit" has all kinds of associations both good and bad (evil spirits, spiritualism etc.) and only a few of these are distinctly personal in tone. Therefore, if the church wishes to make clear that the *Pneuma* or *Spiritus* is a divine person (in the same way as are the Father and the Son) she is truly obliged to use the word "ghost" and speak of "the Holy Ghost." On the other hand, if the church wishes merely to convey the idea that the *Pneuma* is only the power/spirit of God active in the world then "Spirit" will do the job for this word does not, as has been observed, necessarily carry with it the concept of personhood.

There is no doubt but that the preferred and proper name for the third person of the Holy Trinity in the traditional English language/dialect of prayer and of theology is "the Holy Ghost." He is also called "the Spirit of God" and "the Spirit" but only infrequently (until modern times) "the Holy Spirit." The exclusive use of the expression "the Holy Spirit" in modern Bible translation and in liturgies since the 1960s is therefore an innovation.

In *The Book of Common Prayer* (1549 and later editions) which is a genuinely English (rather than a Latinized English) text, "the Holy Ghost," (itself a definitely English expression) is normally used of the third person of the Holy Trinity when he is referred to specifically in his own right. However, when he is considered in relation to the Father then the normal usage is "thy Holy Spirit" and "his Holy Spirit."

In terms of what theologians call the "immanent" Trinity the ancient English tradition of prayer and of theology is to speak of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Thus in the translations of the *Creed* it is always, "I believe in the

Holy Ghost." The word "Spirit" is reserved for the action of "the Holy Ghost" as the Spirit sent by the Father (and the Son) and working in creation and in the church and especially in and with man. So it appears that the word "Spirit" is used of the third person when he is active (1) within what theologians now call the "economic" Trinity and, (2) in a way that is dependent upon the initiative or will of Father or the Son or both.

In the *English Authorized Version of the Bible of 1611*, the *King James Version*, this long-standing English tradition of calling the third person of the Holy Trinity "the Holy Ghost" continues. The expressions "the Spirit of the Lord" and "the Spirit of God" and "the Spirit" are used many times to speak of the action of the Lord/*Yahweh* or the Father within his creation or within the people of God. Nowhere does the expression "the Holy Spirit" as the name of the third person occur. However, the expression, "the Holy Spirit," as the gift of the Father to the faithful child of God occurs once (Luke 11:13).

Thus in *The Book of Common Prayer* and the *King James Bible*, we see (1) "the Holy Ghost" is virtually always used of the third person properly speaking and, (2) "thy Holy Spirit" or "the Spirit" or "the Spirit of God" is used when the primary reference is to the will and the action of the Father (and/or the Son) in the created order through the *Ruach/Pneuma*. Here there is not only the exercise of the long-standing English tradition of religious language, but also there is a theological distinction being made between the *hagion Pneuma* as the third person in the unity of the blessed Holy Trinity (the immanent Trinity) and as the Spirit sent by the Father and as active in space and time on behalf of the Father and of the Son (the economic Trinity).

As with most things, the exception usually proves the rule. There are always variations in an idiomatic form, since human beings are not automata. In the "Collect for Quinquagesima" in *The Book of Common Prayer* the general rule is

apparently set aside for we pray, "O Lord, who has taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts the most excellent gift of charity. . . ." Apparently, the reason for the breaking of the general rule in this "Collect" to speak of "thy Holy Ghost" instead of "thy Holy Spirit" is that the Holy Ghost is a person, and not merely the mystical symbol of the "most excellent gift of charity" that follows. We recall that there have been continuing problems with the personal divinity of the Holy Ghost in the church, reaching back to the Macedonians.

To summarize the general point. An important sophistication of use by our forebears is lost by us when it is decided to adopt a Latin-based word, "spirit" (from *spiritus*), as the sole and only word to translate the New Testament Greek word, *Pneuma*. With this lack of sophistication comes the danger of heresy. Where "the Holy Ghost" is truly known as a divine person then the danger of such heresies as modalism is minimal. Modalism, which is common today, is the doctrine that there is one person who is God and that this one person reveals himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, that is as three modes of being.

By their knowledge of what we now call the doctrine of the "immanent" Trinity the English Reformers made explicit what they believed to be "biblical doctrine," the truth of Holy Scripture in the form of the "economic" Trinity. That is the scriptural doctrine of the Trinity is made explicit by the use of the developed church dogma of the Trinity.

THE BIBLICAL PRESENTATION/DOCTRINE(S) OF THE TRINITY

Since we live in the period of the history of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church that has within her possession the dogma of the Holy Trinity, it is extremely difficult for us—if we are orthodox believers—to read the New Testa-

ment without this dogma influencing our interpretation of the sacred text. And in normal circumstances the dogma ought to influence that reading and it is a good thing for it so to do—as it did in earlier times in the creation of liturgies, creeds, catechisms and confessions of faith.

Yet we are all aware that modern biblical studies and the search for a pristine biblical theology do not permit the bringing of later doctrinal formulations to the study of the text. The question is not what did this text come to mean in the meditation and worship of the early church but what did it mean to the person who wrote it and to those who first received it.

This scientific pursuit, the putting of ourselves in the shoes and skins of the Christians who actually received the documents that make up the books of the New Testament, is of course valuable for it is from the Scriptures that the church is ever to be renewed and reformed. Yet its value, as we know from experience, can be greatly diminished if it proceeds by methods that deny the authority and inspiration of the sacred texts.

What seems to be the consensus of students of the New Testament is that there is no single New Testament doctrine of plurality in God leading to the confession of "the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost." Rather there is a variety of presentations which (by reason of divine inspiration) are complementary but not identical. And each one in its own way is complete for its practical purpose and is functional rather than metaphysical in nature.

If there is a scheme into which all the "theologies" of the Trinity in the New Testament fit it is that which was identified very early in the life of the church. It is the *mission out from the Father* of the Son and of the Holy Ghost complemented by the *return to the Father* by the Holy Ghost of the Son and all the redeemed who are in and with him. The mission out from the Father is told in terms of the doctrines

of Creation, Incarnation and Salvation and the return to the Father is told in terms of the doctrines of the Exaltation of Christ Jesus and believers in, with and through him, of worship, service, sanctification and the Last Things.

In my book, *Our Triune God*, I wrote:

My own preference is to speak of the writers of the New Testament as having a "sense" or "conviction" or "consciousness" of a wonderful and mysterious plurality within the unity of God. This spiritual knowledge of God, the Father, through his Son and in/by his Spirit, surfaces and is expressed in a variety of ways in their writings. This is because it is embedded in their Christian experience and is expressed in their corporate worship and personal piety. However, they did not explore or develop their convictions concerning the plurality within unity in a full intellectual sense. Their concentration and emphasis were to declare and to explain the Gospel of God (the Father) concerning his Son (Jesus Christ) as they were guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. So they provide much information about the eternal God, Yahweh-Elohim, as he is turned toward the world in the work of creation, redemption and sanctification. In particular, they speak much of Jesus of Nazareth as the One in whom God is revealed and active. That is, within the statement of the divine activity and energy, they speak of the relations of the Father and the Son, the Son and the Father, the Father and the Spirit, the Son and the Spirit. Yet, while experience of God is the experience of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, there is no formal doctrine of Yahweh-Elohim as a Trinity in Unity and a Unity in Trinity.³

In this statement I claimed less than did B. B. Warfield in his exceedingly well-written and argued essay on the Trinity.⁴ My judgment is that he allowed the church dogma of the Holy Trinity to influence his reading of the New Tes-

tament and so saw a "doctrine" instead of a "sense" or "vision" or "consciousness" of the Trinity of Person therein. His study is more that of the "economic" Trinity (see below).

In terms of what the New Testament, considered alone, offers us, I lean more to the position adopted by A. W. Wainwright in his textbook, *The Trinity in the New Testament*⁵. And I am happy to go with the Trinitarian argument of Gordon Fee in *God's Empowering Presence: the Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*.⁶

THE DOGMA OF THE "IMMANENT" TRINITY

The early church and her evangelists and apologists lived within a culture deeply influenced by the Greek language and learning. So it is not surprising that the language and teaching of the church had to take into account and be productive within that language and learning. This meant, among other things, that the church had to add to her Hebraic, functional forms of expressing the identity of God, Christ, and the Spirit, a specifically Greek ontological and metaphysical discourse concerning them.

In the *Nicene Creed* of 325 or the *Nicene-Constantinople Creed* of 381 we find a mixture of these two forms of discourse. For example, in terms of functional discourse, God the Father is presented as the Creator of the whole universe, visible and invisible, and Jesus Christ is presented as his only Son who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven to be crucified and then resurrected and exalted. The Holy Ghost is presented as the one who is the Lord and Giver of Life.

In terms of ontological or metaphysical discourse, the most obvious example in the *Nicene Creed* is the expression used of "the only begotten Son." He is *homoousion to patri* (of one substance/essence/being with the Father). Of the Holy Ghost it is said: "who *proceedeth* from the Father; who

with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified."

Following the Council of Constantinople (381) where the extended *Nicene Creed* was ratified, there entered into theological discourse the expression, "one *ousia*, three *hypostaseis*." That is, God is one Substance (Divinity, Godhead, Being, Essence) in three persons (but not three personalities). And by this time the use of ontological categories to speak of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost by bishops and theologians of the church was commonplace. So studies of the Trinity begin to appear in which there is the employment of both functional and metaphysical language—e.g., *De Trinitate* of Augustine of Hippo. Further, church councils begin to employ ontological language freely and normally. And there appears a creed in the West, known by its opening words, *Quicumque Vult*, which is predominantly, but not wholly, written in ontological terms. During this period, particularly in the West, the word "God" not merely added to its New Testament meaning of "the Father" that of the one divine nature ["Godhead/Divinity/Substance/Being"] but also (in theological talk as opposed to liturgical and mission talk) tended to mean only the latter.

So we can see that by the end of the fourth century, and even more clearly as the centuries go by, the pastors and theologians of the church freely speak of the dogma of the Trinity and that this dogma is of (what is later called) the "immanent" Trinity, of God as God is in and unto himself as a Trinity of Persons and as totally separate from his relation to and action within the cosmos. At the same time, while there are traces of the "immanent" Trinity in the liturgy, the predominant doctrine of the Trinity in the Divine Liturgy of the East and of the Mass in the West is that of the "economic" Trinity. The reason for this is that the dominant themes of the liturgy are the action of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost in the salvation and redemption of man.

The addition to the Latin form of the *Nicene Creed* in the West of the word, *filioque*, and the controversy this caused because the Greek church of the East could not accept it, was in essence a debate about the nature of the "immanent" Trinity. In the first place, the question was not, "Did the Holy Ghost proceed into space time from the Father and the Son?" which is a question relating to the "economic" Trinity. Rather the primary question was to do with the internal, infinite and eternal relations within the Holy Trinity concerning God as God is unto himself. The Latins said that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and from the Son—thus *filioque*; the Greeks said that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father alone.

To summarize thus far, in terms of the biblical presentation of the mission of the Father in sending the Son and the Holy Ghost, there occurred a transposition to the sphere of the "immanent" Trinity where the model of mission out from God becomes the model of procession within God. That is, within God as God, the Son is said to proceed from the Father by eternal generation (thus the only-begotten Son) and the Holy Ghost is said to proceed from the Father through the Son by eternal spiration. This model presents the unfolding of unity into plurality.

Likewise there occurred a transposition of the model of the Return of the Incarnate Son by the Holy Ghost to the Father in terms of the union and mutual relations of the three within the being of God as God. This model presents the plurality as a unity. We recall that Augustine sought to capture the latter in terms of his mutual love theory according to which the Holy Ghost is the mutual love of the Father and of the Son.

Now to move on with the story: In the West, the greatest contribution to the exposition of the doctrine of the "immanent" Trinity came from St. Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa* Aquinas begins with a discussion of God as God,

that is God in and of himself. In Questions 2-26 he discusses the existence, nature, and attributes of the one true and living God. In effect this is a study of the one divine nature, the essence, being and substance of God. Then in Questions 27-43 he introduces the Trinity and the three persons, who each possess the one divine nature and their relations to one another. By this methodology there was introduced into theology in a way more pronounced than ever before not merely a distinction but a separation between the one divine nature and the three persons.

In later times this separation was "solidified" when two separate Tracts were developed from the teaching of Aquinas and were used for theological education—one on *De Deo Uno* and the other on *De Deo Trino*. And of course the Trinity presented in the latter is the "immanent" Trinity.

In the *Summa* itself there is much more theology expounded than that found in Book 1, chapters 2-43. And it is all integrated into a systematic understanding. Aquinas must not be blamed for all the uses made of his writings after his death. In terms of the "immanent" Trinity there is much to ponder and learn from in his discussion of the divine processions, Persons and missions within and of the "immanent" Trinity and in terms of the "economic" Trinity, there is much to learn of the way in which God relates to the world as Creator, Savior and Judge.

Yet in his teaching that all divine action external to the internal life of the Holy Trinity is the action in the first place of the one divine nature (and not of any or all of the Persons), Aquinas solidified an understanding that did much in later times to make the doctrine of the Trinity seem remote from practical Christianity and the plain meaning of the biblical text.

In the tract, *De Deo Trino*, it is clearly taught that all external divine works of creation and in salvation history are always acts of the one divine nature—*actio sequitur esse*

(action follows nature/being). Thus, since there is only one divine nature, all divine activity is that of the three persons who share this one nature. The three persons act as one principle. "The Holy Trinity operates inseparably, nor is there a work that the Father does and the Son does not; or that the Son does and the Father does and the Holy Ghost does not" (Fulgentius, *Against Fastidius*, 2:5-6).

Now this principle seems to be at odds with the plain sense of the New Testament where each of the three persons on different occasions is said to act in a way which implies that he only is acting. The scholastic answer to this seeming problem was the doctrine of principle of appropriation. This states that a particular divine action, though it is performed in reality by all three persons, may nevertheless be attributed to one of the three as a manner of speaking.

In academic circles in Rome even in the 1960s it was observed wryly: "The Trinity is a matter of five notions or properties, four relations, three persons, two processions, one substance or nature, and no understanding." Much earlier the "father" of modern liberal theology, F. D. F. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), had written: "Our faith in Christ and our living fellowship with him would be the same even if we had no knowledge of any such transcendent fact [as the Holy Trinity] and even if the fact itself were different."⁷

In the orthodox churches of the East there was no theological development similar to that caused by the scholastics in the West. However, it may be claimed that the distinction introduced by Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) between the essence and energies of God, and given authority by later Councils brought into Eastern theology something similar to the "immanent" and "economic" Trinity.

When we get to the Protestant Reformation we find that the Reformers accepted without question the traditional dogma of the "immanent" Trinity but not necessarily with

all the subtle distinctions introduced by the scholastics. This can be seen both in specific chapters of the confessions of faith of the Reformed, Lutheran and Anglican churches and in the liturgies (especially of the Anglican).

For example the Collect and Preface (in the Prayer of Consecration in the Holy Communion) for Trinity Sunday in *The Book of Common Prayer* reads:

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast given us thy servants grace by the confession of a true faith to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity; We beseech thee, that thou wouldest keep us steadfast in this faith, and evermore defend us from all adversities, who livest and reignest, one God, world without end. Amen.

Who art one God, one Lord; not one only Person, but three Persons in one Substance. For that which we believe of the glory of the Father, the same we believe of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, without any difference or inequality.

When we turn to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) we see the clear influence of the scholastic doctrine of God and of the Holy Trinity. In Chapter 2, titled "Of God, and of the Holy Trinity" there is first a discussion of the one God and then it is said, "In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons of one substance, power and eternity." It was, of course, at this period when the Roman Catholic Church was committed to the scholastic method and to the use of the Tracts for theological education of its seminarians.

We may note that one problem with the exposition of doctrine of the "immanent" Trinity both in Roman Catholicism and confessional Protestantism was that it seemed not to be practically connected to the experience of God in the

world and to the preaching, teaching, mission and evangelization of the church.

THE ECONOMIC TRINITY

When the biblical material is read in the light of the ontological, metaphysical doctrine of the "immanent" Trinity the result is the "economic" Trinity. The "economic" Trinity is not to be equated simply with the biblical presentation/doctrine(s) of the Trinity for it is the reading of the biblical witness and material in the light of the church dogma of the Holy Trinity. Thus connections and interpretations of biblical statements are made that would not be made if in the mind of the reader if there were no paradigm of the "immanent" Trinity.

In fact, the proper study of the Trinity for the church is the study of the "economic" Trinity which presupposes both the biblical witness to the Holy Trinity and the doctrine of the "immanent" Trinity. It is a mistake to equate the biblical witness/doctrine(s) with the "economic" Trinity for the latter could not exist until some ontological and metaphysical understanding was assumed.

The exposition of the "economic" Trinity is thus in terms of language both functional and ontological. There is the movement out from God—the Father sends the only-begotten Son to be incarnate and the Savior of the world; the Father sends his Holy Spirit to rest upon the Incarnate Son; and the Father and the Son send the Holy Ghost to the church where he is the Spirit of the Son and of the Father and is the Sanctifier of the people of God. Into this divine mission out from God we can place the doctrines of creation and salvation.

Then there is the movement back to God. The Holy Ghost guides the people of God, unites them to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son, and he by the same Holy Ghost brings them to the Father. Into this divine mission of return to

God we can place the doctrine of the church, of sanctification and of final redemption.

In the freedom brought about by Vatican II and against the background of Roman Catholic theological studies, where the Tract for seminarians on *De Deo Uno* was studied separately from the Tract, *De Deo Trino*, Karl Rahner proposed the following, revolutionary axiom to his fellow Roman Catholics: "the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity"⁸

The force of this axiom can only be truly appreciated when it is recognized that up to the Second Vatican Council the dominant Roman Catholic teaching through the use of scholastic texts in Tracts did actually make a separation between God as he is in himself (a definite Trinity of Persons) and God as he is toward us in the economy of salvation (the One God) so as to leave the distinct impression that the "immanent" Trinity is not the "economic" Trinity. That is, in the presentation of the "economic" Trinity each of the three persons has no particular involvement in creation and redemption except through acting as one principle with the other persons in the one divine nature which all three possess in totality. God thus relates to man as a Monad, not as a Triad, even though in himself in his own eternity and infinity he is truly a Triad. The attribution of this or that act in salvation history recorded in the Bible to one or another person of the Trinity was seen through the principle of appropriation—that is, the act of the one divine nature was said to be the act of the Father or the Son or the Holy Ghost even though it was theoretically the joint act of all three.

We recall that the word "God" (*ho theos*) had ceased to mean "the Father" (as in the New Testament and in the original Nicene theology) and had come to mean in developed Western dogma "the divine nature" or "the

godhead/divinity." Thus, as a result, it was held that in the economy of salvation the one God, that is the one Divinity (Godhead, Deity, Divine Nature), is truly the Creator, Redeemer and Judge. Thus, the confession of the Trinity of Persons was not obviously related to the work of God in space and time and it appeared to have no practical consequences for the life of the church. Thus to a theoretical Trinitarianism was added a practical unitarianism.

The problem, which the scholastic theology of the Trinity created building upon Augustine's teaching, was that God was not seen as relating to us as God is within and unto himself as a Triad. The root cause of the theoretical division between the "immanent" Trinity of heaven and God the Monad active in salvation, was the separation that was allowed to operate between the one divine substance and the divine personhood, leading to the quasi-independence attributed to the external activity of the divine substance in creation, redemption, and judgment.

With the demise of scholastic education, modern Roman Catholics, freed from the premises of the scholastic theology, can now say that this divine substance exists in, and is identical with, the three persons. So even when acting externally, this divine substance cannot lose this triadic character for such activity is that of the Father through the Son and with the Spirit.

So after Vatican II, Roman Catholic theologians were able to free themselves from dependence upon the scholastic treatises/tracts. They were able to affirm and demonstrate that the axiom of Rahner is true. That is true, if rightly understood.

Writing of this axiom, David Coffey states:

While this is a clear assertion of the unicity of the Trinity and of the ability of each perspective to throw light on the other, it does not tell us which perspective is the more fundamen-

tal, nor does it throw light on the order of our knowledge of the Trinity. For the sake of clarity let us recognize immediately that there are two orders [of knowing] in question here. The first is the epistemological order, the order of knowledge, of discovery, and the second is the ontological order, the order of being, of givenness. These do not necessarily coincide; it is possible that the one be the reverse of the other, and indeed such is the case in the matter of the Trinity.⁹

As was noted at the beginning, the method by which the church proceeded was to move from the study of the biblical texts to the statement of the "immanent" Trinity in dogma; and then from there to the concept of the "economic" Trinity in liturgy and teaching.

Thomas Marsh of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland, attempted to free himself of the received scholasticism and to write of the "economic" Trinity:

In this presence of God within us God now can, and indeed must, be seen as relating to us simply as God is, as a Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit. Each Person as such here enters into a relation with us and we to them. God here is the Triad which God is and not simply the Monad which the divine nature is. But the Triune God is present in us and to us in accordance with the taxis [order] which structures the Triad in itself. This presence is an opening to us of the Father through the Son in the Spirit inviting from us a response in the Spirit through the Son to the Father. This understanding of the way God relates to us now gives real meaning to the structure and language of Christian prayer. This need no longer be explained by invoking the principle of appropriation. The principles of *opera ad extra* and appropriation are now confined to God acting as an efficient cause, though even here . . . the triadic manner in which the divine nature exists must leave some, relative, trace.¹⁰

Of course in the freedom of the post-Vatican II world, not all Roman Catholic theologians and certainly not all Protestant theologians stayed within what we may call Nicene Orthodoxy as they freed themselves of scholastic assumptions.

Claiming to build upon scientific biblical study and Nicene Orthodoxy not a few theologians have opted since the 1960s for a form of the doctrine of the "economic" Trinity that is usually called "social Trinitarianism." While they differ among themselves on details, they share the thought that in the history and acts of salvation the three divine Persons unambiguously act upon each other in a certain ordered way: the Father sends the Son; the Son obeys the Father; the Spirit drives the Son into the desert and so on. They explain that all we know about these Persons in terms of their distinctions and relations is by means of their actions in space and time. But they go on to say that they regard the three as distinct agents in themselves and not only in their participation in the history of salvation. That is, unless their temporal actions ground and indicate their eternal distinctions and relations in some reliable way, the revelation of the Persons of the Trinity in the history of salvation becomes mere appearance and is misleading. So they assume that the God who is eternal and infinite is not different from the God known as three agents in space and time. Thus there is a Trinity of Persons, an "immanent" social Trinity.

Versions of this outlook and approach can be found in the writings of modern theologians such as Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jenson, Gunton, Balthasar, Kasper, Boff and Weinandy. And lying in the background, on the Protestant side, is Barth, and on the Roman Catholic side, Rahner. Those who followed Barth and Rahner are more explicitly "social" in that they emphasize more clearly that the Persons in themselves are distinct agents related in an ordered way.

However, the practical applications and uses made of this approach in terms of the life of the world and of the church differ considerably. Further, it may be noted that some analytical philosophers of religion, such as Richard Swinburne, have taken the "social" dimension to an extreme where the result is something approaching tri-theism.

In passing, we may note that what in general is missing in this modern form of social Trinitarianism is a rigorous attempt to come to grips with the fact that for classic orthodoxy the three persons are one and there is only one God, and not simply sharers of a single divine nature.

With so many theologians discovering social Trinitarianism it is not surprising that this theology has deeply influenced the modern ecumenical movement. Here the presentation of a social Trinity and of God working in the world as a social Trinity has been and is used to underpin and present global doctrines of human solidarity, a diversity in unity. The adoption of this form of Trinitarianism as a model for human society by the World Council of Churches and in various ecumenical discussions has been told by Konrad Raiser.¹¹

It is interesting to note that the two theologians whom Raiser cites as being very influential are Jürgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff. And the basic theme taken up by them from the Eastern doctrine of the "immanent" Trinity is that of *perichoresis* or in Latin *circumincessio*—the interpenetration of the Three Persons in their eternal communion. This *koinonia* or communion between the persons of the social Trinity is then used as a model for liberation on earth of persons and groups. In particular it is used against hierarchical and authoritarian regimes and on behalf of democratic government in church and state and for peace and justice. Such advocacy has not been wholly accepted within the ecumenical movement—see, for example, the criticism of this approach by the late Lesslie Newbigin.¹²

CONCLUSION

Orthodox pastors today, who are diligent in their study and meditation of the Bible and the classic confessional literature, tend to read the Bible, preach, and teach as those who in practical terms believe, teach, and confess the doctrine of the "economic" Trinity. In doing so, they place themselves in the same tradition as those who wrote the great liturgies of the church in the fourth century and who provided prayer books, catechisms, and Bible translations in the Protestant Reformation. And they do this even if they claim what they are doing is simply expounding the Scriptures. In the providence of God the developed Nicene doctrine/dogma of the "immanent" Trinity was not intended to become the preserve of logicians and metaphysicians. It was intended to help form a paradigm in the mind that would assist in the reading of the sacred text of Scripture so that the latter's pages could be the more profitably understood by the pastors and teachers and shared with the people of God.

Today with the publications of dozens of books on the "economic" Trinity from a variety of viewpoints, the pastor who wishes to keep up his reading has to be most careful in his study and evaluation of these books. In particular he needs to know what is the method of biblical study presumed and used; what is the attitude to the classic definitions of the Trinity from the first five centuries of the church's history; what philosophical scheme or tools are being used, and what modern agenda is in view to be justified in whole or part by the "economic" doctrine to be created from Scripture and a view of the "immanent" Trinity. We need to be aware that forms of the "economic" Trinity have been set forth to justify everything from absolute monarchy to modern democracy and from an ordered hierarchical society to one built on feminist or lesbian/gay principles.

The task for any contemporary theologian who desires to write not to advance one's career as an academic but for the benefit of pastors and educated laity is a huge one. One has to be conversant with the content of the Scriptures and how they have been and are being interpreted, with the dogma of the ancient church and the way this dogma was further developed and used in the church over the centuries in East and West, with the liturgical life of the church and how God is worshiped and served, and with the growing volume of modern studies of versions of the "economic" Trinity from Protestant and Roman Catholic as well as eastern Orthodox writers. Further, one needs to have clarity of mind as to what is Personhood in God and how this can be explained in a culture which is heavily committed to individualism and personal autonomy. Someone of the theological ability and practical concerns of B. B. Warfield is required to perform such a task for those who as pastors and teachers wish to be biblically orthodox in this generation!¹³

Author

Dr. Peter Toon is a presbyter/priest of the Church of England and of the Episcopal Church of the USA. He has the D.Phil. from Oxford and is the president of the Prayer Book Society of the USA. (www.episcopalian.org/pbs1928). He has previously contributed to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. Apparently first used by John Urselberger in 1769 according to W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol.1, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 317 (note 112).
2. For further exposition of this methodology see David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas*, (New York: Oxford, 1999).
3. Peter Toon, *Our Triune God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor/Bridgepoint, 1996), 68.
4. "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity" in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Phillipsburg: New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1968), 22-59.

5. A. W. Wainright, *The Trinity in the New Testament*, 2nd edition (London: S. P. C. K., 1969).
6. Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994).
7. F. D. F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989 reprint).
8. Karl Rahner, translated by Joseph Donceel, *The Trinity* (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), 22.
9. *Deus Trinitas*, 15.
10. Cited in *The Triune God*, 1994, 172.
11. Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC, 1991).
12. See the chapter by Lesslie Newbigin, "The Trinity as Public Truth" in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Society*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).
13. For further reading: *The Trinity. An Interdisciplinary Symposium on The Trinity*, edited by Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall & Gerald O'Collins (New York: Oxford, 1999). There is a very useful Select Bibliography on pages 26-27.