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Social Trinitarianism and its Critics

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Use of a social analogy for the Trinity is common in early Christian thought, particularly in the East. For example, the relationship of origin that holds between the equally divine first and second persons of the Trinity can be illuminated by the way a human father generates an equally human son.[1] The unity of nature among the three persons of the Trinity is something like the common human nature shared by three human beings.[2] And the fact that no one doubts Adam and Abel had the same human nature despite their different origins – without and with a human father – helps explain the idea that the unbegotten Father and the begotten Son have the same divine nature.[3]

But it becomes commonplace in Christian theology to prefer a social analogy for the Trinity, over the psychological ones stemming from Augustine, or the analogies with inanimate processes (light and water) that always accompanied social ones in the early Christian East, only after the late nineteenth century.[4] One reason for this development is surely the modern shift in the meaning of the term 'person' employed in the

[1] See, for example, Gregory Nazianzen, 'Fourth Theological Oration', section 20, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 1983, p. 316.

[2] See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, 'On Not Three Gods', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson 1994, p. 331

[3] See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, 'Against Eunomius', III, 3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 5, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson 1994, p. 143.

[4] For a good treatment of this modern trend, with attention to major theologians up to the mid-twentieth century, see C. Welch, *In this Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in*

Latin-derived formula summing up the parameters for proper discussion of the Trinity laid down by the ecumenical councils: 'three persons in one substance.' While having a range of associations, including 'mask', 'role' and 'function,' 'persona' at the time of the ecumenical councils was arguably a technical term used simply to uphold the permanent distinctions among whatever there were three of in the Trinity. Without having any firm definition transferred to theological use, 'persona' could serve as the equivalent of 'hypostases' in the Greek version of same formula; and, like the latter term's (again rather indefinite) sense of individual subsistence, suggested little, therefore, in the way of the 'personal'. 'Person' in modern usage, however, suggests nothing but the personal: for example, the distinctive centre of consciousness, thought and intentional agency that constitutes one's human 'self'. Modern people are naturally inclined to substitute that sort of meaning of 'person' within the Trinitarian formula. Modern theologians try to make a virtue of that fact by drawing out the way in which such a substitution could become a helpful primary analogy for the Trinity. Individual persons are obviously distinct, but they are also social beings, gaining their identities from the relations they have with other persons in human society. While firmly undergirding the distinctness of the three persons of the Trinity, the modern sense of 'person' could therefore also perhaps suggest how the three persons are one: through the intensity of their personal relationships or the manner in which they form an interpersonal community.

The social analogy of the Trinity has the added benefit for these theologians of making clear the biblical roots of the doctrine and its relevance to Christian life – both in dispute in the modern period. For example, even if the idea of the Bible as a source of revealed propositions or deposit of faith has fallen into disrepute with the rise of modern biblical criticism, the gospels still seem to be narrating some sort of relationship of personal community or fellowship between Jesus and the one He calls Father: in those biblical stories Jesus prays to the Father, works to align His will with the Father, strives to carry out the mission upon which He suggests His Father in heaven has sent him, and so on. The Trinity often seemed a speculative theological abstraction of little importance to Christian worship and community life in much of Christian theology after the Enlightenment.[5] But now, using a social analogy for the Trinity, the personal relations or community that Christians form with one another and with the persons of the Trinity for the sake of the world – for example, the way that Christians

Contemporary Theology, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1952, pp. 29–34, 78–85, 95–100, 108–13, 252–72.

[5] Schleiermacher's purported relegation of the Trinity to a near appendix of *The Christian Faith*, Philadelphia: Fortress 1976, because of its lack of direct connection with Christian experience, is often cited as the paradigm of this trend.

pray together to the Father through the power of the Spirit in the name of the Son for help as a community in serving the mission of the triune God within the world – has its foundation in the very life of triune God which is itself something like an interpersonal form of communion.

This latter fact – that the Trinity gains practical significance when understood according to a social analogy – is very much stressed in contemporary theologies concerned with the social and political implications of Christian belief and commitment. In contemporary theology, the espousal of social Trinitarianism, an account of the Trinity in primarily social terms, is what allows the Trinity to be enlisted so readily to give Christian grounds of support for particular socio-political judgments. John Zizioulas, Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff and Catherine LaCugna are among the most important names in this regard.[6] Thus for Zizioulas the primacy of the category of person over substance in Trinitarian theology highlights the freedom of human persons from biological necessity and counters the individualism of modern society by suggesting that even divine persons are what they are only in community. For Moltmann, Trinitarianism breaks through the way in which monotheism legitimizes authoritarian rule by a single holder of exclusive power such as a monarch, and thereby allows humans to assume their freedom both under God and in human society. Because the persons of the Trinity are united to one another in their personal and social character, the Trinity makes clear that human beings are not isolated individuals but persons with social responsibilities, and that human relationships are to take the form not of lordship, but of a fellowship without privileges and without subordinates. For Boff, human community, which follows the pattern of the social Trinity, is to be an open rather than an exclusive one, in which all persons are able to participate fully, and have their differences respected. For LaCugna, the personal and social community of the Trinity refutes the male ideal of autonomy or determination of oneself apart from relations with others, replaces hierarchical social relations with ones of mutuality and reciprocity, and maintains the equal dignity of all. This specific form of contemporary social Trinitarianism, in which political and social judgments come to the fore, is the subject of my critique in what follows.[7]

Although theological judgments here seem quite simple – for example, if the persons of the Trinity are equal to one another then human beings should be too – figuring out the socio-political lessons of the

[6] See J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993; J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom,* New York: Harper Collins, 1991; L. Boff, Trinity and Society, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis 1988; C. LaCugna, *God For Us,* New York: Harper Collins 1991.

[7] An expanded version of this critique can be found in chapter five, 'Politics' of my *Christ the Key*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2010.

Trinity is a fraught task, full of complexities and perils. I systematically explore these complexities and perils, and conclude that it would be better to steer one's immediate attention away from the Trinity when trying to determine the proper character of human relations in Christian terms. Christology, I suggest, is the far more direct and less misleading avenue to take when making socio-political judgments on Christian grounds.

Inflated Claims for the Trinity

My first caveat concerns inflated claims made for the Trinity in contemporary political theology. Many contemporary theologies overestimate the progressive political potential of the Trinity. Monotheism, it is alleged, supports monolithic identities and authoritarian forms of government in which power is held exclusively by a single leader or group. An internally diverse triune God, in which persons share equally with one another, avoids these dangers. Or so the story goes.[8]

Overlooked in such a simple contrast between the political implications of monotheism and Trinitarianism are the complexities of such theological claims (can monotheism and Trinitarianism, for example, be this easily distinguished?), their fluidity of sense (can't monotheism or Trinitarianism mean many different things?) and the possible variety of the political purposes that each might serve. To limit myself to the last consideration for the moment: monotheism need not be all that bad in its political implications. Of course it can suggest rule by one: one God, one lord – meaning one human lord. But monotheism can also suggest (particularly when understood to deny that divinity is a general category of things) that no one shares in divinity and therefore that no one can stand in as God's representative: 'no lord but God'.

Trinitarianism, moreover, is not often – to say the least – historically associated with an egalitarian politics and respect for diversity within community. Trinitarian thinking arose in tandem with Christian support for an increasingly centralized Roman imperial rule, once Christianity became the state religion under the Emperor Constantine. Indeed, the major theological arguments in favour of imperial rule were not at all obviously monotheistic but presumed a diversity of divine principles or powers. Thus Eusebius, in probably the most famous of these, his 'Oration in Praise of the Emperor Constantine', argues that the emperor has near absolute authority to govern the whole known human world as the agent and representative of

[8] See E. Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als Politisches Problem,* Leipzig: Jakob Hegner 1935; Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, pp. 192–202; Boff, *Trinity and Society*, pp. 20–4.

the Word – a second divine principle – who rules the cosmos from on high at the supreme God's request.[9]

Behind this poor historical showing lies the ambiguous socio-political potential of Trinitarian theology itself. Many aspects of classical Trinitarianism seem on the face of it at least politically awkward. Contrary to respect for difference, for example, divine persons are equal to one another because in some very strong sense they are the same. Short of tritheism, it is difficult to argue that divine persons are different from one another in the way human persons properly are – able to go their separate ways, distinguished by their own particular projects and interests, never in exactly the same place at the same time, distinct individuals sharing a common humanity in a general sense, but not the same one humanity in the way the divine persons are the same one and indivisible divine being or substance, and so on. Taken as an indication of proper human sociability, here it seems is humanity subsumed by community with others. (Perhaps for this reason most advocates of a Trinitarian social or political program err, to my mind, in the direction of a very strong communitarianism; that is much of the point of looking to the Trinity for social guidance.) The common theological view that divine persons are constituted by their relations, along with the idea of their indivisibility in being and act, is simply hard to square with a politics that would like to foster the agency of persons traditionally effaced in relations with dominant members of society – women, racial or ethnic minorities, those over-identified with social roles in which their own needs and wants are given short shrift. Moreover, the order among divine persons, no matter how complex, tends to differentiate persons by their unsubstitutable functions or places. The Holy Spirit, for example, has to go third in the liturgically favoured, biblically derived formula, 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. The order among divine persons is therefore ripe for justification of human hierarchy. It easily supports fixed social roles and the idea that people are equal despite the disparity of their assignment to such roles. And so on.

The turn to the economic Trinity – the Trinity's working for us in the world as the New Testament recounts – is no help on this score, although lots of politically progressive Trinitarian theologian seem to think it is. New Testament accounts of Jesus' relations with the one He calls Father are much more subordinationalist in flavour than accounts of the so-called immanent Trinity usually are: Jesus prays to the Father, subordinates His will to the Father, defers to the Father, seems ignorant on occasion of what only the Father knows, etc. (see, for example, Jn 14.28; Mk 13.32; Mk 10.18; Lk. 18.18; Mt. 19.16). This sort of hierarchical relation between Son

[9] Eusebius of Caesarea, 'Oration in Praise of the Emperor Constantine', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, New York: Christian Literature Co., 1890.

and Father, a relationship of inferior to superior, very obviously suggests the propriety of human hierarchy.

Finally, the inclusion of gendered imagery in classical characterizations of the relationships among the persons of the Trinity themselves and in their workings for the world has enormously problematic social and political ramifications. The pervasive Father-Son language of the New Testament in particular always holds the potential for rendering women second-class citizens of the church or effacing their contributions altogether. Granted, Father-Son language is always given a quite limited theological rationale in classical Trinitarian theology. The point is very much not to import gender into God. That is quite explicitly denied: 'The divine is neither male nor female (for how could such a thing be contemplated in divinity …?'[10] The significance of the imagery is quite often limited simply to the idea that the one comes from the other and is of the very same substance with it, equal to it and not other than it. The intent is to distinguish the second person from a creature that also comes from God but is not equal to God. 'Making' language therefore trumps 'kinship' language when the Father's relations with the world are at issue: the Father does not act like a Father exactly in creating the world; the Father makes the world and does not beget it from his own substance. The gendered imagery in classical Trinitarianism is always played off, moreover, against other forms of biblical imagery of a quite impersonal sort – light and water imagery, for example. Paired with these other images, the meaning of Father-Son imagery is therefore often quite abstract, not specific to its gendered character. No one set of biblical images, furthermore, is privileged; they mutually modify one another in their theological import.[11] For example, light imagery is usually considered far better than Father-Son imagery in conveying the inseparable, indivisible character of the two. But whatever the theological intent, the rhetorical punch of the language in practice is another thing altogether; and nothing erases the sorry history in which the importance of such language has been magnified out of all proportion, in defiance of these quite circumscribed understandings of its theological point.

Granted too that in classical Trinitarian thinking this is a Father who acts like a mother: He births or begets the Son. The term used to sum up the activity remains gendered male (probably for one reason because

[10] Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, cited by V. Harrison, 'Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1990) 441; see also Gregory Nazianzen, *Fifth Theological Oration* (31.7), cited and discussed by Harrison, 'Male and Female', pp. 456–7.

[11] For a clear expression of this principle, see Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, Book 8, sections 4–5, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 5, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson 1994, pp. 204–10.

'father' is the dominant gendered term in the New Testament), but the activity itself seems much more in keeping with what only women can do: give birth. Notwithstanding the ancient biological theory in which the father is responsible for the substance of the child – the mother being a mere container for what the father contributes – what is of theological interest here is the way the Son issues immediately out of the Father like a child being birthed from its mother. Birth as the primary metaphor for developing whatever the Father is doing in relation to the Son is therefore quite strong – for example, in Hilary of Poitiers.[12] One might even say, following Ps. 120.3, as Hilary does, that the Son is begotten of the Father's womb.[13] And Jesus' mother, Mary, an actual woman, consequently becomes a prime analogy, since her birthing, like the Father's birthing of the Son, happens in the absence of any contribution by a sexual partner: the Son – the second person of the Trinity – has only a Father in the way the Son incarnate had only a mother.[14]

This sort of gender-bending use of imagery associated with both sexes – a Father with a womb – might very well present the best hope for avoiding the theological reinforcement of male privilege. Gendered imagery is 'exceeded' in a 'baffling of gender literalism'.[15] 'Roles are reversed, fused, inverted: no one is simply who they seem to be. More accurately, everyone is *more than* they seem to be … the Father and the Spirit are more than one gender can convey.'[16] However, nothing stops talk of a Father with a womb from simply erasing the contribution of real women by usurping their place: a man can do everything now! The genders are not being bent here in a strictly reciprocal way. The Father is not simply more than any one gender – male or female – can convey, but is already as Father everything that the other gender ordinarily suggests. The divine Father may act in the way a human mother does; and a human mother – Mary – may give birth in a close parallel to the way the divine Father gives rise to the Son. But the genders are still clearly distinguished by ranking them across the division of human and divine. Women generally and Mary in particular may be privileged over men as the closest analogue on the human plane to divine generation, but they are nevertheless bested on a divine level by what only a Father is said to do. Quite commonly, moreover, the use of both paternal and maternal language merely reinforces gender stereotyping. The Father

[12] See Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, VI, 9, 35; IX, 36 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 9, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson 1994, pp. 100, 111, 167.
[13] Hilary, *On the Trinity*, XII, 8, pp. 219–20.
[14] Hilary, *On the Trinity*, XII, 50, p. 231.
[15] J. M. Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism', in S. F. Parson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 146.
[16] S. A. Harvey, 'Feminine Imagery for the Divine: the Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition', in *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37/2–3 (1993) 114.

is also a Mother because he is nurturing and compassionate and slow to anger, following, e.g. Isa. 49.15; 66:.13.[17]

One might try to avoid gendered imagery altogether. But even when absolutely equal Trinitarian persons of unassigned gender are made the basis for political conclusions, the essential relatedness of those persons easily leads to heterosexism. The importance of differences between male and female for the identity of human persons can simply be presumed and substituted within a Trinitarian account of the essential relatedness of persons to suggest that the identity of a woman depends on her relationship to a male counterpart.[18]

Clearly, then, Trinitarianism can be every bit as socially and politically dangerous as monotheism. Everything depends on how that Trinitarianism (or monotheism) is understood and applied. The only Trinitarianism that is clearly more politically progressive than (some forms of) monotheism is Trinitarianism within a very specific range of interpretations and modes of application. Those lauding the political merits of Trinitarianism over strict monotheism eventually make clear that this holds only for Trinitarianism when properly understood and employed – in other words, for the sort of Trinitarianism they are actively trying to construct. What these theologians are trying to do, indeed, is systematically modify as many of the politically problematic aspects of classical Trinitarianism as they can.

Thus Moltmann and Miroslav Volf argue that the persons of the Trinity are not simply constituted by their relations without remainder.[19] Following Moltmann, politically progressive Trinitarian theologians, such as Leonardo Boff, downplay irreversible orders among the Trinitarian persons in favour of perfectly reciprocal perichoretic relations – relations of indwelling – among them: the Father is in the Son just as the Son is in the Father, etc. It is these perichoretic relations that do the heavy lifting. The reversibility of those relations, rather than identity of substance, is what accounts for the *equality* of the persons. And they come to replace politically problematic

[17] See, for example, Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 171.

[18] M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon 1996, p. 187. Volf moves illegitimately here from a necessity of conceptual reference (from the fact that one term is defined with reference to another) to a necessary relation of fact (women must actually be related to men, e.g. married to them, in order to be themselves). The logical slippage involved becomes readily apparent when one considers other cases where terms are defined with reference to one another but where it would be absurd to infer a requirement of actual intertwined lives of intimacy: heterosexuality, for example, develops as a concept in relation to homosexuality, and so on.

[19] For example, M. Volf, '"The Trinity is Our Social Program": The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement' in *Modern Theology* 14/3 (1998) 410; Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, pp. 172–4.

alternatives, such as identity of substance, as the basis for the Trinity's unity.[20]

The theological merits of these politically progressive theologies hinge on how good the arguments are for such theological moves. One argument in their favour is simply the fact that these moves support a progressive politics, and I have no interest in denying the importance of that. But this political consideration hardly overrides the many problematic features of the sort of Trinitarianism typically advanced. Inexplicably to my mind, for example, no one has adequately addressed how the heavy load that perfectly reciprocal perichoresis carries in these theologies is compatible with their equally strong emphasis on the biblical economy, in which Jesus seems clearly to be acting in a non-mutual relation of subordination to the Father (e.g. the Son prays to the Father, but the Father does not pray to the Son; the Son does the will of the Father, but the Father does not do the will of the Son, etc). In other words, not all the relations among the persons of the Trinity in the biblical narration of them seem even close to being reciprocal ones, in which the persons can change places with one another, and little explanation is offered for this; that fact is for the most part just ignored.[21]

The very heavy emphasis on perfectly reciprocal relations among the members of the Trinity and severe downplaying of any idea of their fixed positions in an order (for example, the persons are often now said to be all equally origins of one another, even if they are always properly named in the order Father, Son, and Holy Spirit[22]) seem, moreover, hard to reconcile with the usual ways of making clear that the persons are distinct from one another. The most common way in the history of theology is to talk about their being related to one another in some non-interchangeable way – the Father is related to the Son as the one begetting Him but in doing so he is specifically the Father and not the Son – and to make a distinction on that basis between communicable or shareable properties (what all the persons exhibit qua divine) and incommunicable ones (when the Father gives the Son everything in begetting Him that does not include the character of being Father).[23] Most politically progressive theologies simply start from the assumption of distinct persons, taking this for granted as a feature of the biblical witness, and go on to talk about the unity of the Trinity on that basis: as a function of how closely related the persons are to one another. But if the relationships they have with one another allow for no distinctions

[20] See, for example, Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 84; and Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 134.
[21] See Boff, *Trinity and Society*, pp. 138–9, where every biblically narrated relationship among the persons is said to involve their being in one another.
[22] Boff, *Trinity and Society*, pp. 138–9.
[23] See Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 88–9, for an explicit rejection of the latter.

among them, it is hard to see how such a starting assumption helps. Their relations work to undercut the distinctiveness of the persons that is simply assumed at the start and there is no remaining way to shore it up.

Other moves made by politically progressive Trinitarian theologians suggest, to the contrary, that the persons of the Trinity are *too* distinct from one another. Moltmann, for example, maintains that the existence of the persons of the Trinity is distinct from their relations.[24] It is simply impossible, Moltmann maintains, for persons to be their relations, in the way an Augustinian or Thomistic account of Trinitarian persons as subsistent relations would have it. But this is simply to give the Trinitarian term 'person' (a rather ill-defined placeholder for whatever there might be three of in the Trinity) the modern sense of 'human person' and then insist on taking it quite literally. It is impossible for human beings to enter into relationships unless they already exist; we have to exist before we can relate to other people. Or, to make the distinction between existence and manner of existence perhaps more properly (as Moltmann himself does in a later article), we can be said to exist because of certain relationships – in virtue, say, of being born of a particular mother and father, whatever the characters we come to have by way of subsequent ones.[25] But why assume any of this must hold for divine persons?

Quite a bit more argument than Moltmann offers would be necessary to justify the use of a modern sense of 'person' here, with implications diverging so markedly from previous uses of personal language in Trinitarian theology. Personal terms have long been employed to talk about the persons of the Trinity: Father and Son are the prime examples. But (as Boff, *pace* Moltmann, properly points out in support of the use of the modern sense of person to discuss the three) that is to suggest the very constitution of such persons in and through their relations with one another: there is no Father without this Son and no Son without this Father.[26] The point was to highlight their essential or constitutive relationality; personal language was certainly not used to distinguish the existence of a person of the Trinity from the *way* it exists in relation to another.

Taken literally, the argument clearly suggests tritheism. The persons of the Trinity become very much like human persons; and therefore the Trinity itself becomes a collection – tightly interwoven to be sure – of distinct persons on a very close – too close – analogy to a society of human persons.

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[24] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 172.
[25] Moltmann, 'Theological Proposals towards a Resolution of the *Filioque* Controversy' in L. Vischer (ed.), *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ*, London: SPCK 1981, pp. 164–73.
[26] Boff, *Trinity and Society*, pp. 88–9, 115–16.

From God to Humans

No matter how close the similarities between human and divine persons, differences always remain – God is not us – and this sets up the major problem for theologies that want to base conclusions about human relationships on the Trinity. The chief complication is how to move from a discussion of God to human relationships, given those differences.[27] How exactly, in short, does a description of the Trinity apply to us? Three more specific problems arise here.

First of all, the differences between God and us suggest we do not understand very well what we mean when using ordinary language to speak of the Trinity. What the Trinity is saying about human relations becomes unclear, because the meaning of the terms used to talk about the Trinity is unclear. Divine persons are equal to one another, but in what sense? The persons are in one another but what does 'in' mean here? Divine persons are distinguished from one another by the character of their relations but who understands exactly what that character is? So Hilary can say: 'Begetting is the secret of the Father and the Son. If anyone is convinced of the weakness of his intelligence through failing to understand this mystery … he will undoubtedly be even more downcast to learn that I am in the same state of ignorance.'[28] What indeed does even the language of 'person' suggest, if with Augustine we have to say that 'the formula three persons was coined, not in order to give a complete explanation by means of it, but in order that we might not be obliged to remain silent.'[29] Because God is not very comprehensible to us, and certainly not fully so, discussion of the Trinity, all by itself, seems of little help in better understanding human relationships: what is difficult to understand – the proper character of human society – is explicated with reference to what is surely only more obscure – the character of divine community.

The second problem is that much of what is said about the Trinity simply does not seem directly applicable to humans. The differences between God and humans stand in the way. Many of these differences that prevent a direct application have to do with the essential finitude of human beings. Human society could therefore take on the very character of the Trinity in these respects in which they differ only if people were no longer human. So, for example, it seems bound up with their essential finitude that human

[27] See M. Volf, *After Our Likeness,* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 1998, pp. 191–200; and his 'Trinity is our Social Program', pp. 403–7.
[28] Hilary, *On the Trinity*, II, 2, p. 55, following the more felicitous translation in Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 174.
[29] Augustine, *On the Trinity,* V, 9 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans 1956, p. 92, following the more felicitous translation in Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 143.

persons can only metaphorically speaking be in one another, if that means having overlapping subjectivities in the way the persons of the Trinity do.[30] Because all the other members of the Trinity are in that person, when one person of the Trinity acts the others are necessarily acting too. Clearly this does not hold for human persons: I may enter empathetically into the one I love, but that does not mean I act when my beloved does.

Divine persons, moreover, seem much more relational than human beings. Human persons can never be as closely tied to their relations with others as persons in the Trinity are commonly thought to be; and that is the case even were one to think (as I do not) that it is proper to make a real distinction between the existence and character of Trinitarian persons.[31] Thus it would be very unusual to suggest that Trinitarian persons temporally precede the relations among themselves that make them what they are, in the way this happens in human relations. Human beings have no character to begin with as that is decisively shaped by what happens to them later; I therefore exist prior to those relationships with duplicitous significant others, for example, that end up making me a bitter, distrustful old person.

Character, moreover, in human beings is not as bound up with actual relations with others. I can be defined by certain general relational capacities before (and whatever the way in which) these capacities are actualized in my relationships. For example, my character might be constituted by the tendency to be suspicious before, and whether or not my relations with others give me good grounds to be that way. For much the same reasons, the character formed in me in virtue of my relations with others remains even when the relations that gave rise to it end: for example, my character remains despite the deaths of the people and communities who have contributed most to it. The relational characteristics of Trinitarian persons, to the contrary, are much more tightly a function of actual relationships: the Father, for example, is not defined as someone with the general capacity to beget someone or other, but as the Father who is and remains such only in begetting this Son.[32]

Furthermore, the character of a human person takes different forms in the course of relations with different people. I always have the capacity to be more or other than I am right now: I have the capacity, for example, to be enormously engaging and incredibly funny (unlike now); and the capacity to be hateful when made the brunt of ridicule, and therefore to know a human person in her relations with you is to know her only incompletely. Theologians generally do not want to say anything quite

[30] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, pp. 209, 211.
[31] See T. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?,* Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 2000, pp. 115, 119, 128, 134–5, 140, 207–8.
[32] See Gilles Emery, 'Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in Saint Thomas Aquinas?' in *The Thomist* 64 (2000) 551–3.

like that of the Trinity: Trinitarian persons are fully themselves in their relations with one another and with us; Trinitarian persons are not in themselves, for example, other than the persons they show themselves to be to us.

Moreover, despite their intense relationality, Trinitarian persons remain irreducibly distinct from one another in ways that human beings cannot imitate. Father and Son remain absolutely different from one another in the Trinity, so to speak, because, unlike the case of human fathers and sons, here the Father has never been a Son – the Father is always Father – and the Son never becomes a Father – the Son is always Son. The terms Father and Son in the Trinity do not, in short, indicate general capacities which a variety of individuals might exhibit, but are person-defining properties. In the human case, I am different from my mother in that I am my mother's daughter but I can also become like my mother by becoming the mother of a daughter myself; and therefore in being different from my mother I am not absolutely different from her. The human relations that distinguish people never simply define them and therefore one can lose the way one has been identified by virtue of those relations (one's identity as a daughter, say, once one's mother has been dead for thirty years) and take on others (the identity of a mother to one's own daughter) while remaining oneself. But persons of the Trinity are too tied to their specific relationship, for example, of being Father and Son, to do this. They are too absolutely what they are – Son or Father – and too absolutely distinct from one another in such a relationship for that to be possible.

Indeed, in the Trinity relations of tremendous intensity never threaten the individuality of the persons in the way relations like that threaten to blur the identities of human beings. Unlike the case of Trinitarian persons, the finitude of humans seems to require the policing of boundaries between themselves and others that break off relationships. I will never be my own person unless I can break away from the incredibly intense relationship I have with my mother. In the Trinity, to the contrary, the persons are absolutely different from one another in the very intensity of the relationships they have with one another. It is because the relationship is so intense for them both, so to speak, that the Father can only be a Father and the Son only a Son.

Finally, human finitude also seems to entail that humans give of themselves so that others may gain in ways that often bring loss to themselves. In the case of Trinitarian persons, in contrast, their perfect equality is usually thought to involve giving without loss and receiving without increase. The first person of the Trinity does not give all of itself to the second at any cost to itself; and the second does not receive from the first what is not already its own.

One could argue, as I have done elsewhere, that loss in giving to others on the human plane is a function of a world in disarray and not a necessary

consequence of simple finitude.[33] It is possible in principle for the world to be arranged in ways that make giving to others a benefit to oneself. But this simply brings us to the third problem: direct translation of the Trinity into a social programme is problematic because, unlike the peaceful and perfectly loving mutuality of the Trinity, human society is full of suffering, conflict and sin. Turned into a recommendation for social relations, the Trinity seems unrealistic, hopelessly naïve, and for that reason perhaps even politically dangerous. To a world of violent, corrupt and selfish people, the Trinity seems to offer only the feeble plaint, 'Why can't we all just get along?'

So how is the gap between the Trinity and sinful, finite human persons to be bridged in ways that allow us to see its implications for human community? One strategy for bridging the gap is to supplement the move down from the Trinity when envisioning human society, with a move up from below.[34] In other words, given what one knows about human beings, one can figure out the extent to which human relations might imitate Trinitarian ones. The Trinity tells us what human relations should ideally be like. The understanding of humans as creatures and sinners tells us of what sort of approximation of the ideal we are in fact capable. The danger of such a strategy is that the Trinity fails to do any work. It does not add anything to what we already know about the real possibilities for human community, given the human limits and failings we live under.

The other major strategy for closing the gap looks to the economic Trinity for help.[35] One does not have to bring an account of the Trinity together with what one knows about the limits of human life to figure out how human relationships could come to approximate Trinitarian ones. The economic Trinity – how the Trinity acts in saving us – instead makes that clear, because what one finds in the economic Trinity itself is the Trinity brought closer to what humans are capable of. For example, in the economy the Trinity appears as a dialogical fellowship of love and mutual service between Jesus and the one he calls Father – the kind of relationship that human beings could imitate because it is one in keeping with their finitude – in contrast, say, to perfectly mutual indwelling or perichoresis.

The same goes for sin. The economic Trinity is the Trinity entering a world of sin and death. Apart from any theological speculation, the economic Trinity itself therefore gives a clue as to how Trinitarian relations should be lived out in a world of sin. For example, those relations have the broken and sorrowful character of a Father losing his own Son by way of a death undergone for the sake of others.

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[33] See my *Economy of Grace*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press 2005.
[34] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 200; and his 'Trinity is our Social Program': pp. 405–6.
[35] See Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*; and LaCugna, *God for Us*.

However, the same sort of problem that beset the previous strategy resurfaces here. The closer Trinitarian relations seem to human ones in the economy, the less the Trinity seems to offer advice about how to move beyond what we already expect of human life, given human limits and failings. The Trinity simply confirms what we already know and solidifies our chastened hopes under the circumstances. We all have some sense of what dialogical relations of loving fellowship are like. We all know about the way death severs relationships and about how obedience to a good cause often comes at the price of sacrifice in troubled times. And the Trinity offers us nothing more.

Do We Model Ourselves on the Trinity or Participate in It?

My own strategy for closing the gap also looks to what the Trinity is doing for us – what is happening in the life of Christ, in short – to answer the question of how the Trinity applies to human life. The Trinity itself enters our world to close the gap, but not (as the previous strategy suggested) by presenting us with a form of the Trinity we can imitate; the Trinity does not close the gap by making itself over in a human image of community in which we can imitate dialogical fellowship, say. Instead, in Christ the Trinity enters our world to work over human life in its image, through the incorporation of the human within the divine Trinitarian life. By joining us to those relations. Christ gives us the very relations of Father, Son and Spirit for our own. By becoming incarnate, the second person of he Trinity takes the humanity joined to it into its own relations with Father and Spirit, and therefore in Christ we are shown what the Trinity looks like when it includes the human, and what humanity looks like when it is included in the Trinity's own movements – the character of a human life with others when it takes a Trinitarian form, as that is displayed in Jesus' own human life.

The gap between divine and human is not closed here by making the two similar to one another, but by joining the two very different things – humanity and divinity – into one via Christ, via incarnation. Trinitarian relations need not be like human relations in order for humans to be taken up in this way into them, and therefore the problematic trade-off mentioned earlier is avoided: The more Trinitarian relations seem close in character to human ones (and therefore relations that human beings could imitate), the less the Trinity tells you anything you did not already know about them. Gone, too, is the basis for hope in the idea that Trinitarian relations are sufficiently close to human ones to be imitated by us. Now hope is fuelled by how *different* the Trinitarian relations, in which we are to be incorporated, are from anything with which they are familiar under the constraints

of finitude and sin. The difference between the Trinity and us now holds out hope for a radical improvement of the human condition. The Trinity is not brought down to our level as a model for us to imitate; our hope is that we might one day be raised up to its level.

Finitude is no longer a problem either. Finitude does not make Trinitarian relations inaccessible to us, since human relations come to image Trinitarian ones as they are swept up into them and not as they become like them in and of themselves. Human relations need not somehow become more than human themselves in order thereby to approximate the Trinity. Human relations, which remain fully human, only image the Trinity as they are joined up with its own life. Humans do not attain the heights of Trinitarian relations by reproducing them in and of themselves, by mimicking them, in other words, but by being taken up into them as the very creatures they are. They come to share a divine form of existence, not their own by nature, by becoming attached to it.

The usual strategy of looking to the economy – the Trinity at work in the world – seems stuck on the idea that the Trinity appears to us in the economy as a model for our imitation because it fails to follow the economic workings of the Trinity all the way down to their impact on us. In other words, that strategy stops with relations among Trinitarian persons in the economy – for example, the Son incarnate doing the will of the Father – and makes them a model for human ones rather than following through on what the economy of the Trinity itself is suggesting about human relations. Jesus' life, in short, exhibits not just the sort of relations that humans, in the image of the Son, are to have with Father and Spirit – relations of worshipful dedication to the Father's mission, empowered by the Spirit – but in his relations with other people Jesus also shows how those relations with Father and Spirit are to work themselves out in community with other people. If one wants to know how a Trinitarian life impacts on one's relations with other people, this second part of the story is very obviously the place to look: Jesus' relations with other people constitute the sort of human relations that the economy of the Trinity itself specifies; Jesus' way of life towards other people as we share in it *is* the Trinitarian form of human social life.

It is not at all clear, however, that Jesus' relations with other people are Trinitarian by following the Trinitarian pattern of his relations with Father and Spirit. The human being Jesus relates to Father and Spirit in much the way the second person of the Trinity does. Because Jesus *is* the second person of the Trinity, He retains as a human being the same sort of relations with Father and Spirit that He has as the second person of the Trinity. This is a very direct translation of Trinitarian relations into a human form. But none of that is true for Jesus' relations with other people; they are simply not the direct translation of Trinitarian relations into a human form in the same way.

Indeed, if one takes into account the whole story of the economy – both parts of it – and avoids isolated attention to what is narrated about the relationships among the Trinitarian persons, it is not at all apparent that the one side establishes the pattern for the other: Jesus' relations with Father and Spirit do not appear in any obvious way to be the model for His relations with other human beings in the story. Rather than establish the pattern for human relationships, Jesus' relations with Father and Spirit are – quite obviously – the sort of relations that it is appropriate for humans to have with Father and Spirit. One is to worship the Father following the precedent of Jesus' own prayers, carry out the will of the Father as human beings filled up with, empowered by, the Holy Spirit as Jesus was, which means working for the wellbeing of others like Jesus did, and so on. But why think one will relate to other humans in the process in anything like the way one is relating here to Father and Spirit?

Let me make the same rather obvious point in the light of the way we are incorporated within the Trinitarian life by being joined to Christ. When humans are incorporated into the Trinity through Christ, different people are not spread out across the Trinity to take on its pattern; instead, we all enter at the same point, we all become identified with the same Trinitarian person, members of the one Son, sons by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and move as a whole, as one body, with the second person of the Trinity in its movements within the dynamic life of the Trinity. The Trinity does not therefore in any obvious way establish the internal structure of human community, the unity of the Trinity being what makes human society one, the diversity of the persons establishing its internal complexity. Instead, the one divine Son and the one divine Spirit are what make human society one; we are one, as the Pauline texts suggest, because we all have the same Spirit and because we are all members of the one Son. And the diversity of this human community is internal to the one Spirit and one Son, so to speak; the diversity is a diversity of gifts of the Spirit and of that one Son's bodily members. Rather than establishing the pattern of unity and diversity in human community, the Trinity establishes more what that one united but diverse body of spirit-filled sons by grace does, how it moves; the whole body of Christians moves together in the way any single human being, united to Christ's own life, follows a Trinitarian dynamic.

There are of course New Testament passages that suggest the unity between Son and Father is what unity in human community is to be like: Jesus asks his Father 'that they may be one as we are one' (Jn 17.11, 22). Rather than read these passages as some brief for understanding the unity of human persons on an analogy with unity among persons of the Trinity, one can, however, take them to be indicating simply the centrality of Christ, and of his relations with the Father, for our relations with the Father. That is, Christ is one with the Father, perfectly doing the Father's will, and we

should all be one by being one with the Father as Jesus is, united in doing the Father's will in the way Jesus does.

The way Jesus images in a human form the relations among Father, Son and Spirit has an effect, of course, on his relations with other people: Jesus relates to other people in highly unusual ways, which have everything to do with his relations to Father and Spirit. The way the persons of the Trinity relate to one another over the course of Jesus' life, relations among the divine persons in which we are to share by being united with Christ in the Spirit, bring with them changed relations among human beings. The Son is sent by the Father into the world and, empowered by the Spirit, to carry out a mission that brings him into relationship with us. A life empowered by the Spirit in service to the mission of the Father for the world means that Jesus is with and for us, and that we, in turn, are to be with and for one another, in the way that mission specifies.

The character of that mission, as Jesus' own way of life makes clear, is to inaugurate a life-brimming, spirit-filled community of human beings akin to Jesus in their relations with God: the mission means bringing in the kingdom or new community that accords with Jesus' own healing, reconciling and life-giving relations with others. This way of being is what the Trinitarian relations as they show themselves in the economy – Jesus' praying to the Father and serving the will of the Father in the power of the Spirit – amount to in human relational terms. Jesus' relations with Father and Spirit make His whole life one of worshipful, praise-filled faithful service to the Father's mission of bringing in the kingdom; that is to be the character of our lives too, both in and out of church, as we come to share Jesus' life. We are to participate in the Father's mission for the world, mediating the life-giving Spirit of Christ, through union with Him. Glorified, worked over into Christ's image, so as to take on his shape in relations with other human beings, we are to form the citizens or members of a new kingdom or community with Christ as both the director and forerunner of the sort of new lives we are to lead together.

The question then becomes what the kingdom has to do with the Trinity that works to bring it about. To what extent is the kingdom, in other words, not just the consequence of a Trinitarian life like Jesus' in relation to Father and Spirit, bound up, part and parcel of it for that reason, but also reflective of the Trinity's own character? A lot depends here on exactly what one thinks the kingdom is like. I would venture that the kingdom is like the Trinity in that both are supremely life-affirming for all their members, organized to bring about the utmost flourishing of all. Both are paradigmatic instances of what I have called elsewhere a community of mutual fulfilment in which the good of one becomes the good for all.[36] The

[36] Tanner, *Economy of Grace*.

Trinity is coming to us to give us the sort of life-giving relations of mutual flourishing that the Trinity itself enjoys.

There is an analogy, then, with the Trinity, but not a very specific one. What one gets out of the Trinity here for an understanding of the kingdom one might also find by treating any number of other theological topics: the incarnation, for example. The incarnation too – but in a significantly different manner from what one finds in the Trinity – sets up a kinship, in this case between humanity and divinity, a community of now mutual fulfilment in that the human is to benefit from what the divine already enjoys. In some ways, indeed, the incarnation is a better model for the sort of human community or kingdom to be set up: when every human being becomes one in Christ this overrides in a significant sense forms of already established kinship that would otherwise keep people apart; this is an unnatural community, one might say, in much the way human and divinity in Christ are an unnatural community, made up of what is naturally disparate and dissimilar. More like the relationship between humanity and divinity in Christ than the Trinity, this is a community of previously diverse persons brought together only by something different from them that they all share: Christ.