

Divine attributes in a trinitarian key



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The traditional treatment of the divine attributes in theological discourse has been criticised for what some scholars regard as the influence of Greek philosophy, which they argue may result in distorted concepts of the divine. A further development in the doctrine of God is the renewed consciousness of the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. The purpose of this article is to consider how these developments may impact the doctrine of the divine attributes. Can the doctrine of the Trinity enhance an articulation of the divine attributes? To illustrate the difference that a trinitarian approach to the divine attributes could make, divine omnipotence, as well as the possibility of discovering new attributes will be considered.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article is an intra-disciplinary study with implications for dogmatics or systematic theology. It addresses the doctrine of the divine attributes from a trinitarian perspective. At stake is the impact of different approaches within the same discipline. In this case, the engagement is between a trinitarian versus a classical approach to the study of the divine attributes.

Keywords: attributes; beauty; hospitality; monotheism; omnipotence; relational; trinitarian; Trinity.

Introduction

The 20th century has witnessed a number of significant developments in the theological arena, not least of which is the lively debate which has developed around the doctrine of God. Two of these developments are important for this article: Firstly, it was argued by certain scholars that in the Tradition the doctrine of the divine attributes has mainly been articulated from Greek philosophy rather than from the biblical revelation of the triune God, and therefore 'point to the need for a thorough rethinking of the doctrine' (Migliore 2014:85); and, secondly, the doctrine of the Trinity 'made an important comeback among Christian theologians' (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:80). Both of these developments have important consequences for the way in which the doctrine of the divine attributes is presented in theological discourse. I will briefly discuss these developments before turning to their implications for the study of the divine attributes. To illustrate the difference that the doctrine of the Trinity may contribute to the discussion of the divine attributes, I will consider omnipotence as an attribute of the triune God from a trinitarian perspective. This will be followed by a discussion of the possibility of identifying new attributes in light of the Trinity.

Dissatisfaction with traditional approach

For many the current discourse about God has become problematic (Migliore 2014:66–68). The charge against the classical doctrine of God is that this doctrine shows far greater resemblance with Greek philosophy than with the biblical witness of the Living God, especially as God is presented in the Old Testament. Gunton (2002:3) argues that this custom has resulted in what he describes as a 'sub-Christian doctrine of God'. The image of God that emerges from such an articulation of the doctrine is sometimes so distorted that Pinnock (2001:68) feels justified to refer to it as a 'pagan legacy' and he objects that 'Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek and the Bible was written in Jerusalem, not Athens. The Christian doctrine of God was, however, shaped in an atmosphere influenced by Greek thought'. Various examples can be shown where the attributes of God's transcendence, using such adjectives as infinite, omnipotent, unchangeable, incomprehensible, etc. – often described in *abstract and philosophical terms* – dominate the discussion of the divine attributes in theological discourse (cf. Gunton 2002; Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:79). Only afterwards are the attributes of God's condescension (faithful, good, compassionate, etc.) then discussed (Guthrie 1994:103). The image of God that this way of presenting the attributes creates runs the risk that it can hardly be distinguished as that of the triune God of the Bible (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:78).

Note: Special Collection: Trinity.

However, not everyone agrees with the given sentiment. There are scholars who argue that such a claim is simply exaggerated and leads to false conclusions. Bray (2002:108), for instance, argues that these claims are unreasonable and unfounded. While he accepts the fact that the vocabulary of Greek philosophy was employed to explain certain concepts of Christian doctrine, he is satisfied that 'these words have been given new meanings in Christian theology' and are therefore appropriate (p. 109). Bray's conclusion may be correct to some extent, but it cannot be denied that often these concepts have been given meanings, which have no, or very little, correlation with the ways in which the Bible portrays God's attributes.

While the Greek influence may not be as significant as is sometimes claimed, one can hardly ignore its effects on the Christian doctrine of God, especially in the way that some of the divine attributes have been articulated in scholastic theology. Brunner (1949:244) was probably not exaggerating when he claimed that '[a]nyone who comes for the first time from the Bible into the world of Scholastic Theology feels himself in a foreign world'. Whereas the classical doctrine of God should not be rejected outright, it could be argued that the Greek influence created an image of God, which does not do justice to the teaching of Scripture. Instead of formulating the divine attributes from the revelation of God as recorded in Scripture, they were often mainly described in abstract terms, leaving Berkhof (1979:109) with the uneasy feeling that 'there was an imprint upon the minds of many the image of a distant and cold deity'.

But what are the reasons for this unfortunate situation? One reason, which has been observed by various theologians (Plantinga, Thompson & Lundberg 2010; Rahner 1997; Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017; Venter 2011), is that in most scholastic dogmatics the treatment of *De Deo uno* – with a discussion of the divine attributes in generic terms – often took preference over a 'much shorter' treatment of *De Deo trino*, which came only afterwards (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:76). Venter (2011:13) calls this 'structuring of the doctrine of God and treatment of the attributes ... a strange hybrid: Firstly, a generic notion of God is stated and then a Christian notion is added'. This approach resulted in distorted perceptions of some of the divine attributes, which can hardly be identified as the attributes presented in Scripture. Immutability, for instance, was described in terms of a God who has no feelings, and omnipotence implied that God, 'in determining and executing his will, is not subject to any restrictions because he is simply able to do anything' (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:77). Although it may not be intentional, separating the treatise of the one God from the treatise of the Trinity may create the impression that the doctrine of the Trinity is not important and, therefore, not necessary for a correct understanding of the doctrine of God. The *potential danger* of such an approach is that the doctrine of the Trinity becomes irrelevant and marginalised. Pannenberg (1994:283) argues that behind decisions of structuring the doctrine of God lies the question about the

importance of the Trinity in relation to the unity. According to him, it is mainly this 'lack of an inner systematic connection between the trinitarian statements and the divine unity', which was partly responsible for the decay of the doctrine of the Trinity (p. 291). Although the custom to develop 'a doctrine of God general enough to fit every religious conviction' before turning to the doctrine of the Trinity 'has a long and distinguished history in Christian theology', Migliore (2014:68) takes a stand against this treatment of the doctrine in favour of a trinitarian approach. I concur with him and with Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:78) who argue that 'the doctrine of God, with the related treatment of the divine attributes must be approached from the basis of the doctrine of the divine Trinity'. The concept of the One God needs to be interpreted by the triune God as revealed in the biblical narrative and not vice versa (Plantinga et al. 2010:91).

Revival of trinitarian theology

The latter half of the 20th century has witnessed 'a new appreciation of the centrality and importance of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity' (Venter 2011:3). So vast was this renewal of trinitarian theology that Kotsko (2021:143) dubbed the 20th century as the 'trinitarian century'. It was the renowned Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1975:295–304), who – contra Schleiermacher, who relegated the Trinity to the end of his dogmatics – included a treatise on the Trinity as part of his *prolegomena*, thereby declaring its importance for the whole of dogmatics. This step by Barth has not only 'reoriented Protestant theology back towards the great catholic tradition' but also sparked renewed interest in the doctrine and secured it a prominent place on the theological agenda (Hunsinger 2011:294).

An important characteristic of this new interest in the doctrine of the Trinity is the conviction that *the Trinity is central to the Christian Faith*. The Trinity is the basic truth at the heart of Christianity and is essential for the church's witness in the world (Hunt 2005:4). 'To be a Christian is to believe in, experience and worship God in a Trinitarian way' (O'Collins 1999:1). Leup (1996:29) argues that Christians are not mere monotheists, they are trinitarians. 'The confession of one God in three persons is rightly regarded as proper and specific to Christian faith in God' (Kasper 1984:233).

Equally important, is a growing resistance against a speculative construction of the doctrine of the Trinity based mainly on a consideration of the immanent Trinity – a charge that was made early in the 20th century by Schleiermacher (1928:747–748) – and a deliberate turn to the economic Trinity for a development of the doctrine of God. Venter's (2011:4–5) argument that 'the economy of salvation is the ground and criterion of all knowledge of God' is important. In this way the doctrine is determined from the biblical witness of the Living God and released from the cold, rational metaphysical philosophy of the scholastic tradition. In this regard, Rahner's Rule that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa, is – in a qualified sense – important (Rahner

1997:22). 'God in his saving action "for us" is the same as (or identical with) God "in himself," the Trinity *ad extra* is the same as the Trinity *ad intra*' (Marshall 2004:187). There is no hidden God behind the revelation of God in the biblical narratives of the incarnation and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Another significant development, with important implications for trinitarian discourse, is *the metaphysical shift from a substantial to a relational ontology* (Shults 2005:5–9). Postmodern thinking is characterised by a move away from a *closed system* to an *open network of relations*. Instead of the classification and isolation of persons by separating them, typical of modernity, in the postmodern paradigm the interdependence between persons and their relations with each other is emphasised (Cunningham 2003:188–190). The enlightenment idea of person as 'individual' has also been questioned: 'Personhood cannot be divorced from relation' (Cunningham 1998:27). Influenced by the work of Zizioulas (1985:87–89), who distinguishes sharply between 'individual' and 'person', most contemporary scholars acknowledge the importance of the relationality of personhood. This shift in thinking has profound implications for the doctrine of the Trinity, and marked a move away from the traditional approach in which the *one divine substance* has been emphasised at the cost of the *three hypostases*. The acknowledgement of difference has allowed the shift to an emphasis on the 'narrative context from within which trinitarian theology arose' (Cunningham 2003:192). This opened the way for the move towards a methodology of developing trinitarian theology from the reality of *the three persons* to the divine unity, while at the same time avoiding tri-theism. In this new approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, scholars are becoming more comfortable with a *social* model of the Trinity with its emphasis on the relational nature of the triune God, which they believe is more consistent with the biblical narrative. Venter's (2011:5–6) comment beautifully sums up this view: 'This *social understanding of the Trinity* is nothing but an exegesis of the Johannine saying that "God is love," speaking the grammar of personhood, relationship, community and reciprocity'.

Attributes reconstructed from a trinitarian perspective

Traditionally, the divine attributes have been classified as 'communicable' and 'incommunicable' attributes, or, attributes of the divine transcendence and attributes of the divine immanence. While these classifications served a valid purpose, it has become unpopular with a number of contemporary scholars. Barth (1957:345) deviates from the tradition and classifies the attributes as the attributes of God's Love and the attributes of God's Freedom. In his discussion of the individual attributes, he combines an attribute of God's Love with an attribute of God's Freedom, which allows him to give priority to the personal attributes, while simultaneously 'to engage in their light, with the traditional treatment of the attributes by giving due account

of the more metaphysical and philosophical terms, such as eternity and omnipresence' (Gunton 2002:100). A recent example of a different approach to the divine attributes is Kärkkäinen (2014:294–309, 2019:75–83) who, in his dogmatics, classifies the attributes as those of the *eternal God* (holy, faithful, all-wise, all-powerful, all-present) and those of the *loving God* (compassionate, good, merciful, just and righteous).

The current debate over the classical doctrine of God has highlighted a growing discomfort among modern theologians with the ways in which the divine attributes have been articulated in the past. They ask that the discussion of the divine attributes be revised and there are even voices that question whether it is at all meaningful to still speak of the divine attributes (Kärkkäinen 2014:285). The efforts to downplay the influence of Greek philosophy on the attributes are also not convincing. The danger still exists that where a *substantial ontology* is the context within which the divine attributes are considered the non-personal attributes (eternity, immutability, etc.) will appear prominently, while personal attributes, such as love and faithfulness, will not receive the attention they deserve. Where a *relational ontology* is engaged, those attributes that show forth God's involvement with creation usually receive more adequate attention. Here, God is not perceived as a strictly numerical unity but as the three persons who exist in and with one another in the *perichoretic unity* of their communion. There is no substance hiding behind the persons. An encounter with each of the persons is an encounter with Godself.

When the divine attributes are considered, it is necessary to keep in mind that these:

[A]ttributes are always understood to be attributes of the triune God, attributes peculiar to the persons, relations and their perichoresis which overflows in their creating, reconciling, and perfecting action in the world. (Holmes 2007:3)

Renewed appreciation of the doctrine of the Trinity has opened the way for an emphasis on the importance of the Trinity for a correct and meaningful consideration of the divine attributes. In this way both the attributes of God's transcendence and the attributes of God's immanence may be articulated from 'a central point of view', namely the Trinity (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:141–142). Barth (1957) stresses the importance to view the divine attributes in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity:

To speak of God's attributes as we must and may do, since we are speaking of Him on the ground of His revelation, means therefore to speak again and this time properly, in concrete definition, of His being. It is impossible to have knowledge of God Himself without having knowledge of a divine perfection, and it is impossible to have knowledge of a divine perfection without having knowledge of God Himself – knowledge of the triune God who loves in freedom. For as the triune God, both in regard to His revelation and to His being in itself, He exists in these perfections, and these perfections again exist in Him and only in Him as the One who, both in His revelation and in

eternity, is the same. To grasp and understand this connexion is the special task of the doctrine of God's attributes. (p. 323)

It is, therefore, impossible to reflect meaningfully on the doctrine of God without considering God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Holmes (2007:3) touches on an important point when he claims that 'a dogmatic account of the divine attributes is inseparable from a trinitarian dogmatics'.

The argument that the divine attributes should be articulated in the light of the Trinity is, however, not shared by all. One scholar who strongly disagrees, is Sonderegger (2015:xiv), who argues against this approach in favour of an emphasis on the Oneness of God, 'for', she claims, '*monotheism* is not a shame word!' She argues strongly in favour of the Oneness of God as the starting point for any discourse on the doctrine of God (pp. 7–8, 25). According to her, the confession of 'the One God, the One Lord of Israel' (Dt 6:4) should be the governing principle for the Christian doctrine of God (p. 3). She further laments the turn from what she calls a 'naked' doctrine of God – 'a God considered apart from or prior to the Trinity' – to a trinitarian articulation of the divine attributes, which may end, she cautions, in contempt for the term *monotheism* (p. 7). She argues that, when we consider the doctrine of God we should not focus our attention on the 'story' or 'narrative' in Scripture, but on the 'teaching' sections of the Bible, which will reveal 'its proper heart and subject matter: the Oneness of God' (pp. 11, 14).

Sonderegger's position must not be viewed as a rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity per se. She is careful to make her acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity clear and claims that 'no Christian doctrine of God can ever dispense with a full and dogmatic doctrine of Trinity' (Sonderegger 2015:7). What she suggests is not the repudiation of the doctrine of the Trinity, but simply that any *starting point* in a doctrine of God should be the Oneness of God and, by implication, not the Trinity. Her fear is that a trinitarian approach to the divine attributes may 'replace or silence the Oneness of God' (p. xiv).

Sonderegger's concern for the Oneness of God is commendable. Christians are the people of the *One God* (Dt 6:4; Mk 12:28–29). However, that this One God eternally exists as a Trinity of three persons is also clearly implicated in Scripture and is basic to the Christian Faith. The incarnation of the Son and the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity by the early church. Also, Sonderegger's argument that the doctrine of God should not be established from the biblical narrative but only from the teaching material (i.e. Torah) is unfortunate. All biblical doctrines should be based on the *complete revelation* as recorded in Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, which includes the narrative as well as the teaching sections. Furthermore, taking the doctrine of the Trinity as starting point in a consideration of the divine attributes would not necessarily undermine a belief in the One God. On the contrary, such an approach would enhance the Scriptural teaching that the One God of the Old and New Testaments exists as three persons: Father, Son and Holy

Spirit (cf. Mt 28:19; Rm 13:13). Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:142) correctly points out that:

[I]f we are serious in our belief that God has made himself known through the Bible as the triune God in the economy of salvation, we will have to take this belief as our point of departure for thinking and talking about God's attributes.

Approaching the divine attributes from a trinitarian perspective is perfectly sound and within the bounds of orthodox theological discourse.

The question is, of course, whether a trinitarian approach to the divine attributes would make any considerable difference to the image of God that will emerge. Theology stands in service of the church and the world. Will a trinitarian theology enhance the church's and the world's understanding of who and what God is? To illustrate the valuable contribution that the doctrine of the Trinity can make to a discussion of the divine attributes, in the next section the attribute of *divine omnipotence* will be considered, showing the difference between an abstract and merely philosophical treatment of this attribute and a trinitarian articulation thereof. Then, in the final section, the possibility of discovering new attributes in light of the Trinity will be illustrated with examples from Barth and Kärkkäinen.

One illustration: Divine omnipotence

That God is almighty is well attested in Scripture (Gn 17:1; Job 42:2; Jr 32:17; Mt 19:26; Rm 1:20; etc.). However, God's power must not be understood as the ability to do literally anything. When the divine omnipotence is considered in abstract and mostly philosophical terms, it easily leads to some absurd questions, such as whether God can create a stone, which is so heavy that even Godself cannot lift it; or, whether God can tell a lie; or, whether God can make a square that is round. Barth's (1957:533) reaction to such questions – and rightly so! – is that 'this would be impotence, not power'. God's omnipotence should not be regarded as meaning that God can do anything and everything (*potential absoluta*). Such 'an undifferentiated view of God's omnipotence cannot be derived from the Bible' (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:146–147). For example, God *cannot* do evil; or be uncaring; or act in self-contradiction to God's goodness (Guthrie 1994:111–112). Barth (1957:522) points out that God's power is not just any power, but is the 'power over everything that He actually wills or could will'. Guthrie (1994:111–112) wisely defines God's omnipotence as follows: '*God's omnipotence, then, means that God can do anything and everything that is consistent with God's goodness and love*' [italics in original]. Unlike the conclusions reached from a mere philosophical contemplation of the divine attributes, the biblical record emphasises that Godself alone determines the limitations of God's power (Barth 1957:522–533).

The word 'omnipotence' in Christian theology is not merely a Greek expression describing a generic God, but speaks of the almighty God's turning towards, and involvement in, the

world God has created (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:145). When the power of the almighty God is considered in the light of the acts of the Trinity as described in Scripture, the focus is on God's benevolent acts of creation, redemption and renewal. Barth (1957:532–533) is adamant that God's power is the power to be Godself as Father, Son and Spirit. 'As with every other perfection, so with omnipotence: Barth insists that it be understood as that of the triune God of the covenant as attested in Scripture' (Price 2011:145). This is well explained by the Cappadocian fathers who taught that 'all of God's acts take their beginning in the Father, are put into effect through the Son and reach their completion in the Spirit' (Gunton 2002:77). God's power is the power of the triune God who loves in freedom and who creates space for others to also have power within themselves, and is therefore 'the power of the eternal love in which before all worlds God is not only full of power in Himself but as Father and Son always has power in another' (Barth 1957:538).

God's power is demonstrated in the actions that God performs and these actions are trinitarian, involving all three persons. The Father initiates, the Son accomplishes and the Holy Spirit applies what the Son has accomplished (Poythress 2020:94). In the incarnation it is the Father who sends the Son for the salvation of the world. In his acts of redemption and reconciliation, culminating in the cross and resurrection, the Son accomplishes the work that the Father has sent him to do. On the day of Pentecost the Father and the Son sent the Spirit to bring the redemption of the world to completion by applying the benefits of Christ's sacrifice to the world.

Any reference to power in the postmodern world quickly raises the question of the abuse of power and speaking of divine power is often related to religious violence (Kärkkäinen (2014:302, 2019:78–79). A trinitarian understanding of God's power, however, emphasises that God is not a heavenly tyrant who destroys God's enemies, but our heavenly Father who cares and sustains his flock. God's power is 'the particular power that works through the cross and of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead' (Gunton 2002:62). The power of God, as revealed in Scripture, is closely related to the salvation of the world. God displays God's power in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. Furthermore, God's power is the guarantee that God will complete the work that God has begun in us (Gunton 2002:133):

God can be God in weakness as well as in strength, in defeat and suffering as well as in victory, in the form of a lowly Servant as well as in the form of an exalted Lord – sharing our human condition rather than looking down on us from the safety of a heavenly throne. (Guthrie 1994:112)

Barth's pairing of God's omnipotence with God's constancy is significant. God's power is the power of the God who remains faithful (constant) in God's dealings with us. 'God has the power, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to be Himself and to live of and by Himself' (Barth 1957:532). The idea of God's power should not cause the believer to despair. As it is the power of the God who is benevolent towards us, it gives

us the assurance that God will demonstrate God's power towards our well-being. The almighty God's power is sovereign over all other powers, not in a tyrannical way, but in a way that allows existence of other powers (Barth p. 538). Price (2011) sums up Barth's doctrine of the divine omnipotence well:

To sum up, the thrust of Barth's treatment of omnipotence is his insistence that it is God's own, triune power and therefore personal power, specifically, knowing and willing power, and therefore a truly living and truly loving power. (p. 158)

God the Son demonstrates his omnipotence in the sense that he allows himself to be humiliated on the cross, and finally to be defeated in weakness and in death. 'Christ crucified is the power of God unto salvation (1 Cor. 1:23–24)' (Migliore 2014:89). He has the power to lay down his own life and take it up again. The Father raises the Son from the grave through the power of the Holy Spirit. The almighty God displays God's power in weakness by allowing Godself to become vulnerable. Berkhof (1979:133–140) expresses this vulnerability of the almighty God as 'defenseless superior power'. He explains defenselessness as 'that attribute by which he [God] leaves room for his "opposite" and accepts and submits himself to the freedom, the initiative and the action of that "opposite"' (p. 134).

A trinitarian approach links the omnipotence of God with God's love. God's power is not a brute power whereby God can do anything and everything, but because God loves the world, it is the power by which God does what is beneficial for the world. This is not the power of a monarch raised to the highest degree, but the power of the triune God who, in Godself, is Love (1 Jn 4:8). The love among Father, Son and Holy Spirit overflows into the world in a demonstration of power. God demonstrates God's power not only in bestowing benefits upon God's creation but also in God's giving of Godself. 'The *power* and *love* of the triune God are inseparable' (Migliore 2014:88).

New perspectives on divine nature?

Contemplating the divine from within a trinitarian perspective may not only enhance our understanding of the traditional divine attributes, but may also open up the possibility of discovering new attributes (Venter 2011:10). Here, two examples come to mind: Barth (1957:649–666), who includes a discussion of the *beauty* of God in his reflection on the divine glory and Kärkkäinen (2014:310–339, 2019:83–94), who describes *hospitality* as a prominent attribute of God.

Beauty as divine attribute

It is sad that the concept of 'beauty' has been mainly neglected – with a few exceptions – in Christian theology (Delattre 1968:118). The Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards regarded beauty as one of the distinguishing attributes of God and considered God the fountain of all beauty (Delattre 1968:117). However, after Edwards, beauty as a divine

attribute has disappeared from the theological discourse until Barth revived this attribute of God in his dogmatics.

In his discussion of the divine glory, Barth turns his attention to the *beauty* of God (Barth 1957:651). The beautiful God attracts, persuades, enlightens and convinces through the sheer joy that God's beauty radiates. 'Barth wants to emphasise *via* beauty that God's glory does not exclude ideas of what is pleasant and desirable' (Holmes 2007:79). God is worthy of love and admiration because of the beauty of God's glory:

God has this superior force, this power of attraction, which speaks for itself, which wins and conquers, in the fact that He is beautiful, divinely beautiful, beautiful in His own way, in a way that is His alone, beautiful as the unattainable primal beauty, yet really beautiful. (Barth 1957:650)

God's beauty is an outcome of his glory and should, therefore, not be considered apart from the divine glory (Price 2011:175). Barth considers God's beauty in God's form, in the trinity of God and in the incarnation of the Son (Holmes 2007:80). It is significant that Barth (1957:659–661) links God's beauty directly with 'the trinity of God'. God's beauty 'reflects the triune being of God' (Barth 1957:661). God's beauty is reflected in the mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) of Father, Son and Spirit, where 'one is both by the others and in the others' (p. 660). God's beauty is reflected in the triune fellowship of the Trinity:

The jubilation of the Godhead is precisely the shared glorification of the three persons, a glorification which surrounds us and in which we are invited to participate as the very fulfilment of our destiny. (Holmes 2007:79)

The beauty of God is displayed in the love of the persons of the Trinity. It is in the 'loving and harmonious relations of consent in the triune life' that the beauty of God is displayed (Venter 2010:189).

The hospitality of God

In his reflection on the divine attributes, Kärkkäinen (2014:310–339, 2019:83–94) engages with hospitality as an attribute of God. 'To speak of God is to speak of giving, gift and hospitality' (2014:310, 2019:83). When one reflects on the attributes from a trinitarian point of view it is quite appropriate to describe God as hospitable. In God's love for the world, God seeks out those who are worthless in themselves and gives *Godself as the gift* of God's love. The cross of Christ, where God gives Godself for the salvation of the world, is the greatest expression of hospitality (2014:310–312, 2019:83). God's hospitality is also reflected as inclusion, in which 'male-dominated God-talk' – which may be offensive to women – is supplemented with other more inclusive terminology without doing away with the traditional names of 'Father, Son and Spirit' (2014:312–319, 2019:83–85). The relational character of God as 'the dynamic, living, engaging community of the three' (2014:320) sheds further light on the hospitality of God. This *communion* of Father, Son and Spirit, is not a closed community, but is 'open' for the other and invites the other to

enter into relationship with the triune God (2014:320–324, 2019:85–86). The hospitality of God is also an antipode to *violence*. The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us of God as 'the God who embraces rather than excludes' (2014:329) and demands that we should be tolerant toward others in order to enhance peace and thereby help alleviating violence, especially between religious groups. Another characteristic of divine hospitality is the *advocacy* on behalf of the marginalised of society (2014:331–335, 2019:87–88). It is significant that Kärkkäinen (2014:335–339) links God's hospitality with *human flourishing*. In an act of great hospitality towards God's creation the triune God invites everyone to join in God's fellowship of love (cf. Jn 14:23; 17:21–23; 1 Jn 1:3).

Conclusion

The call for a revision of the doctrine of the divine attributes from a trinitarian perspective is valid. In such a revision, the move from a substantial to a relational ontology must be fully negotiated. This will result in a different perception of the Oneness of God, in which God's unity will not be perceived in strictly numerical terms, but will fully allow for the perichoretic communion of the three persons, in which each makes space for the others in their unity. Divine omnipotence also takes on new meanings and is closely related with God's faithfulness and love. It is the power through which God performs mighty acts for the redemption and well-being of creation. It is in this power that the Son could humiliate himself through death on the cross for the salvation of humankind. No wonder Paul calls this crucified Christ 'the power of God' (1 Cor 1:23–24). When the attributes of God are considered in the light of the Trinity the possibility to detect attributes that have not necessarily featured in the past may surface, as was demonstrated with the attributes of beauty and hospitality. A fully trinitarian vision of the divine may open new and exciting avenues for a greater and more faithful discourse on the divine attributes to the benefit of church and society.

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