

A low-flying trinitarian theology

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The claim is sometimes made (and also contested) that, following contributions of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, there has been a renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity among Christian theologians. This essay further develops the metaphysically circumspect or 'low-flying' trinitarian theology I present in *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. Drawing on the work of Donald Baillie, B. A. Gerrish, James M. Gustafson, Hans Küng, H. Richard Niebuhr, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Paul Tillich and others, I argue that such a theology better accords with the New Testament than many realise, and that it has a broad and robust significance for theological ethics. Whether my theology contributes to the recent renewal of interest, however, depends on whether one judges that explicitly revisionary critics of orthodoxy's metaphysical heights qualify as trinitarian theologians.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The essay indicates that traditional assumptions about trinitarian claims in the New Testament are too narrow, that it is important to attend to the fuller range of trinitarian reflections in the field of Church History and that a pragmatic, metaphysically circumspect trinitarian theology has profound implications for Christian life and faithfulness.

Keywords: Christology; ethics; Spirit; theology; Trinity.

Introduction

I have been asked to write an essay in honor of Rian Venter that elaborates on my approach to the Trinity in *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Ottati 2020). I am happy to do so, partly because Professor Venter makes a good guide to a 'Trinitarian renaissance' that he says goes back to Karl Barth and Karl Rahner (though I think Paul Tillich may make it a trio). More recent participants, says Venter, draw on Catherine La Cugna's 'programmatic statement' that the Trinity 'is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life' (Venter 2019:3-4). For example, Ellen Charry claims that the doctrine has a 'sapiential aim' in close connection with spiritual formation (Venter 2015:2).

Venter also notes 'the presence of *dissenting* voices'. Thus, B. D. Marshall thinks that the Trinity was hardly marginalised in Christian history and that the twentieth- and twenty-first century trinitarians do not stand in continuity with that longer tradition. Kathryn Tanner suspects that some typical claims for the Trinity's practical significance, for example, life is inherently social and so requires 'true mutuality, respect, and recognition', do little more than offer 'mere platitudes', which convey 'ideas we already know' (Venter 2019:1-2, 4). Venter, therefore, suggests that the renaissance may have entered into a more nuanced and cautious phase (Venter 2019:5).

My own theology is, I think, both trinitarian and pragmatic, though I locate the practical significance of trinitarian reflections a bit differently than do some recent writers. Moreover, my metaphysically 'low flying' reflections put me at odds with the 'maximal' cast of much mainline trinitarian thinking, which, as B. A. Gerrish points out, 'insists that the presence of God in Christ and the church requires us to think of two further hypostases in addition to the Father' (Gerrish 2015:305). I therefore qualify as a participant in one or another phase of a trinitarian renaissance only if the net is cast rather widely. Let me explain.

Christian theology and its trinitarian vision

Whether trinitarian or otherwise, Christian theology is itself, I believe, a historically particular and practical wisdom with a rather definite pastoral aim. Enriched by interactions with other traditions, sources of insight and ideas, it makes use of resources drawn from the Bible and from Christian traditions to formulate a vision of God, the world and ourselves that help people take

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up and explore a specific piety and manner of living. My focus then is on the contributions that Christian theological wisdom may make to faithful living.

John Calvin begins his *Institutes* by saying that much sound wisdom consists of the knowledge of God and of ourselves, where knowledge (*cognitio* and *notitia*) is closely connected with faith, assurance, mind and heart (Calvin 1960:35, 541, 559–560, 580–581, 583–584). This suggests a theological modification of the ancient and practical dictum, ‘Know thyself’. We know or apprehend ourselves and the world more truly in relation to God, and we know God more truly in relation to the world and ourselves (Ottati 2017:368–371). This basically is what I take Christian theology as practical wisdom to be about.

I believe further that Christian vision is appropriately trinitarian in a way that roughly corresponds to the three articles of the Apostles’ Creed (which document, the reader may note, does *not* scale the metaphysical heights of later orthodoxy). God the Father, the maker of heaven and earth, is the Creator who brings into existence and also governs all things. Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, is the reconciler who embodies God’s will (or Torah/teaching) for us in a personal human life. The Holy Spirit is the dynamic giver of true life and the sanctifier whose work is completed in life eternal (Ottati forthcoming). I think that this vision emerges from a biblically initiated exploration, but one that yields somewhat different results than trinitarian ‘maximalists’ often suppose.

The divinity of Christ and the New Testament

Trinitarian maximalism takes root in claims for the divinity of Jesus, but, as Gerrish notes, and as many others concur, ‘in the Gospels Jesus does not claim to be God, but to be sent by God’. Note a few highlights. In Mark 10:18, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’, or Mark 9:37, ‘Whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’ (Gerrish 2015:142; Ottati 2020:384–392). Add the testimony of demons in Mark 1:24 who identify Jesus not as God but ‘the Holy One of God’ (Collins 2007:172). Again, the Lord’s Prayer or ‘Our Father’ as presented in Matthew and in Luke seems at home within Judaism, and here, Jesus does not teach his disciples to pray in his own name. Bruce Chilton says that the Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as the kingdom’s herald and advocate, the Son of Man or agent of redemption who will return to Earth and vindicate his followers (Chilton 1996:135–138). ‘Indeed’, says Geza Vermes, ‘it is no exaggeration to contend that the identification of a contemporary historical figure with God would have been inconceivable to a first-century Palestinian Jew’ (Vermes 1993:212).

Do other New Testament texts attribute deity to Jesus? Gerrish surveys passages sometimes taken to state explicitly that Jesus is God. He notes, for example, that texts in Revelation distinguish the Lamb from angels and also picture the Lamb and the Father receiving adoration together (5:13, 7:10), though ‘the distinction between God and his messiah is plain (11:15, 12:10)’ (Gerrish 2015:142). Colossians 2:2 presents

Christ as God’s mystery rather than simply as God, and a distinction follows from the claim in 1:15 that Christ is the image or icon of the invisible God. Romans 9:5 is a problematic verse that may be rendered in different ways. (Compare the NRSV, ‘to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen’ with the NEB, ‘There are the patriarchs, and from them, in natural descent, sprang the Messiah. May God, supreme above all, be blessed for ever. Amen.’) Hebrews 1:8 is grammatically ambiguous and may be translated, ‘God is your throne’, while other passages in Hebrews designate Jesus ‘the apostle and high priest of our confession’ (3:1), ‘the pioneer and perfecter of our faith’ who ‘has taken his seat at the right hand of God’ (12:2) and ‘the great shepherd of the sheep’ (13:20). Gerrish also says, ‘most commentators think it improbable that the statement in 1 John, ‘He is the true God’ (5:20) refers to Christ’ (Gerrish 2015:142).

However, what of the Gospel of John? Here, when he tells the disciples, he is going away and that the Father will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, ‘in my name’, Jesus rather famously says:

You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you’. If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. (Jn 14:28).

Consider John 12:3, ‘And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent’. Gerrish adds that, in John 1:1, there is ‘in the Greek ... no definite article with *theos* (God), and some scholars argue that a more correct rendering of *theos en ho logos* would be “the Word was divine” as in James Moffatt’s translation (Gerrish 2015:143). Ernst Haenchen translates John 1:1 as follows: ‘in the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and divine [of the category of divinity] was the Logos’ (Haenchen 1984:102). Therefore, the question of the divinity of the logos or the Word in the opening verses of John is somewhat complicated. Gerrish notes too that there are disagreements over how to translate ‘the remarkable expression *monogenes theos*’ in John 1:18. In fact, ‘the sole place in the New Testament where everyone agrees, Jesus is incontestably called “God”’ is John 20:28 when Thomas addresses the risen Jesus as ‘My Lord and my God’. However, some also suggest that this is a ‘Christian reply to the insistence that the Emperor Domitian be addressed as “lord and god”’, and one also needs to square Thomas’s exclamation with the repeated subordination of Jesus to the Father in John’s Gospel, which the Arians found congenial (Gerrish 2015:143–144). Again, Hans Küng says that the fourth Gospel clearly distinguishes God and God’s emissary, and that it ‘does not develop any speculative metaphysical Christology’ (Küng n.d.:60).

Gerrish concludes that catholic orthodoxy imposed ‘a dogmatic unity’ on the variety of Christologies in the New Testament ‘that was not there to begin with’. The point is not that the Nicene Creed’s ‘true God from true God’ is biblically irresponsible. Particularly if we allow for an eventual mixture

of 'the matrix of Jewish ideas in which Christianity was born' with later 'Hellenistic religious and philosophical ideas' (Gerrish 2015:144). Again, if one begins with the developed two-natures Christology of the later councils, one can pick out spots in the New Testament, where it seems foreshadowed. (Beware, however, of the tendency of some classical theologians to overreach, and to mistakenly equate the New Testament's use of the term 'Son of Man' with Jesus' human nature, and its use of 'Son of God' with his divine nature. In fact, as we see in Daniel 7:13–14, Mark 14:62, and Psalm 2:7, the 'Son of Man' is an apocalyptic figure seated at God's right hand who returns on the clouds, and 'Son of God', which need not carry metaphysical connotations, means one who does or is aligned with God's will.) The point is rather that Christologies other than the two-natures one also are biblically responsible (Ottati 2020:435).

An alternative Christology

My own understanding of what classical theology calls 'the person of Christ' is that, for the Christian community, the reconciling event of Jesus Christ displays a pattern or manner of life appropriately adjusted to the divine. I think it follows that, for this community, the Christ, the one who displays truly human life in appropriately responsive relation to the divine, also discloses the divine. Christ's ministry and mission are fitted to the dynamic reality of God, or, as Richard R. Niebuhr says, Jesus as the Christ is 'a God-shaped man' (Niebuhr 1972:124, 130). Jesus's ministry centres on his message of the kingdom of God and his enactment of it in accepting and reconciling actions and practices that challenge and overcome barriers and boundaries, for example, eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, or commending the actions of a Samaritan. This pattern displays the divine excellence as well as the basic skein or trajectory of a human life authentically fitted to the divine excellence. It bears the impression or imprint of the divine (Heb 1:3). We, therefore, may say that Jesus as the Christ is the living Torah, icon, wisdom or Word of God manifest in a person, precisely because his manner of life and his ministry are authentically conformed to God's will. This seems comparable to Küng's statement that in Jesus 'God's word, will and love took human form' (Küng n.d.:61). In any case, he who has seen him has, therefore, seen the divine tendency and excellence. Indeed, when Christians look to Jesus Christ, they see the reality of God and of human life in appropriate relation with God.

Unlike Christologies that try to further or explain the Chalcedonian metaphysics, my formulations do not require me to give a hard-and-fast interpretation of God's nature, of the human nature 'assumed' by the Word, or of how their properties are shared. I am relieved of having to answer questions such as these because I regard incarnation talk as one of a number of possible and also largely symbolic ways of articulating piety's apprehension that, in Jesus as the Christ, we know the God of grace and what it is to be genuinely human in relation to the God of grace. Clearly, my

formulations do not protect all that the ancient metaphysically maximal (and especially Alexandrian) Christologies meant for some strands of ancient piety. For example, they do not vouchsafe the conviction that the salvation of humans is a process of 'divinization' that hinges on the hypostatic union in Christ of the divine and human natures. However, again, I think that there are other (and also biblically more satisfactory) ways to address questions of salvation, life eternal, etc.

In the Synoptics, Jesus as the Christ or Messiah proclaims and enacts the kingdom of God. He teaches and performs a pattern of affection and action that points uncompromisingly to God's purposes, as these purposes come to expression in the divine reign or kingdom (Ottati 1996:50–72). Or, to put this differently, Jesus's *theocentric piety* disposes and shapes the reconciling pattern of his ministry and mission, and so, in turn, the reconciling pattern of his ministry and mission conforms to God's kingdom purpose.

Why do Jesus's ministry and message take on this specific manner, cast or temper? Donald Baillie suggests in his little book, *God Was in Christ*, that Jesus's exceptional receptivity to grace was itself the product of a prevenient grace at work in and through multiple factors. Thus, in Augustine's arresting phrase, Jesus Christ – at least in the view of many Christians – is 'the brightest illustration of grace' (Baillie 1948:118). Or perhaps, we shall turn to mythopoetic portraits of Jesus's spiritual conception and the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove at his baptism. In any case, the Gospels present Jesus as a person whose life and ministry are gripped by theocentric kingdom piety, who, therefore, displays human life in appropriately responsive relation to God and thus also discloses the gratuitous excellence or dynamic of the Real or of the Creator–Judge–Redeemer.

This is a way of saying how the event of redemption-in-Jesus-Christ constitutes the paradigmatic disclosure for picturing God and ourselves. Is it also an appropriate way to specify the meaning of the word *incarnation*? Yes, if we understand incarnation as a symbolic concept that expresses and shapes the sense that in Jesus as the Christ, we apprehend and encounter the excellence of the God of grace at work in bringing things into existence and in bestowing new and renewed life. Yes, if we understand incarnation to indicate the contours of the divine excellence in a human life conformed to it. However, certainly not in the sense of the classical two-natures doctrine taken as a substantive metaphysical specification of how humanity and divinity coinhere in Christ's person.

My view, which is indebted to Christological hints in James M. Gustafson's *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, is that one may say that the Christ incarnates theocentric piety and devotion, and that through the gospel portraits, we see and know something of the divine reign or dynamic of the Real, as it impinges upon us (Gustafson 1981:276). Similarly, H. Richard Niebuhr holds that Jesus Christ incarnates 'radical faith' in 'the Lord of heaven and earth as fatherly goodness

toward all creatures'. This faith, says Niebuhr, comes to expression in Jesus's:

[A]cts of healing as well as in teaching, in his interpretation of the historic moment in which he lives and in the leadership he seeks to give to his people, in his relations to national enemies and to the morally rejected. (Niebuhr 1993:42; 1951:27)

However, these statements do not repeat the conciliar Christology, a fact I do not regard as disqualifying, as I also think such statements accord more closely with a variety of New Testament symbols and ideas than we often recognise.

All this basically follows the general lead of Friedrich Schleiermacher who held that the perfectly potent God-consciousness of Jesus yields a new and ideal spiritual life. Indeed, he says, 'to ascribe to Christ an absolutely powerful God-consciousness' that determines the shape of his life, 'and to attribute to Him an existence of God in Him, are exactly the same thing' (Schleiermacher 1976:386–387). Whether this last statement ventures a step too far will depend on just what one means by 'an existence of God in Him', but I agree with the basic point that the Christ, the one who displays the new or true human life, also discloses the divine and divine purposes.

Donald Baillie's position is similar. The perfect receptivity of Jesus to God's grace yielded a life and ministry pleasing to God. In addition, this grace, says Baillie, on which Jesus's obedient human choices were wholly dependent, 'was nothing short of an incarnation' (Baillie 1948:130–131). In this connection, consider too Tillich's claim that Christ represents essential humanity as well as the relatedness of God to humanity (Tillich 1957:94, 96). However, like my own these positions are comparatively 'low flying' to the extent that they need not require the maximalist metaphysical claims of the later, 'two-natures' Christology.

A Trinitarian exploration

With this in mind, turn now to the trinitarian explorations of the New Testament communities. Early Christians accepted from Judaism the conviction that God is one creator, governor and deliverer. The Gospels portray Jesus teaching his disciples to pray to 'our Father', whose name is to be hallowed and whose kingdom shall come, the God who feeds birds and clothes lilies, who creates all things and whose reign is nearing fulfillment. Communities gathered in Jesus's name through the power of the Spirit believed that in Christ Jesus, the person-for-others who was crucified and resurrected, 'there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (2 Cor 5:17).

How did they interpret their experience of reconciliation, redemption and renewal in the context of their monotheistic conviction? For one thing, they said Jesus as the Messiah, or the Christ is the one who proclaims the advent of God's kingdom and the one in whom that saving reality is made manifest. Again, he is the exalted 'Son of Man' who will return with the clouds of heaven (Mk 13:26); the second

Adam, who succeeds where the first failed (Rm 5:12–19; 1 Cor 15:45); the teacher who delivers perfect wisdom (Mt 5–7) and the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2). His cross is the power of God (1 Cor 1:18). This is not all. Designations multiply, from 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' (Col 1:15–17), and the one who 'was declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead' (Rm 1:4), to the Logos or Word of God who, in John 1:1–14, was in the beginning with God (Ottati 2020:357–392).

Those who experienced the risen Lord sacramentally and otherwise in the early church believed that the Spirit endowed Jesus with power and also gathered and energised the church in his name (Mt 3:13–17; Ac 2:1–21). Believers were baptised and grafted into the body of Christ, united with one another, and reborn in the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13; Jn 3:1–9). By the Spirit Christians received gifts of wisdom, knowledge, healing, discernment, tongues and the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor 12:4–11). In the Spirit, they were sanctified and justified (1 Cor 6:11), and they experienced a new life of love, joy and peace (Gl 4:6; 5:22–25).

With some frequency, then, the early communities' explorations into experiences of redemption and renewal point to a threefold pattern or dynamic in their experiences of God, though there are also some twofold designations, such as the benediction in Hebrews 13:20, which mentions 'the God of peace' and 'our Lord Jesus'. The Creator and Father of the universe, as well as of Jesus Christ, reigns over all things and meets us at every turn in both nature and history. Jesus as the Christ is God's Son, the person who communicates God's grace and acceptance and who embodies and empowers a manner in life or existence that looks to the interests of others and accords with God's reign. The Spirit (of God and also of Christ), the Advocate energises, inspires and empowers the new life of community, reconciliation, faith and love. (Paul associates 'the Spirit of Christ' and 'the Spirit of God' quite closely in Romans 8). This threefold pattern – articulated symbolically rather than precisely – becomes the impetus for trinitarian thinking and the touchstone to which trinitarian theology always returns.

These statements are biblically secure. I agree with Rahner (1974:22) who notes that 'in reality the Scriptures do *not explicitly* present a doctrine of the "immanent" Trinity (even St. John's prologue is no such doctrine)'. What can be gleaned from a number of New Testament passages is what many call an 'economic' trinitarianism. Here again, later orthodoxy has sometimes imposed a dogmatic clarity on varied New Testament images that was not there to begin with. Here again, orthodoxy's loftier and more definite metaphysical heights were born with later Hellenistic sensibilities and ideas. And so, other sorts of trinitarian reflections are biblically possible, if not also biblically more congenial.

Hans Küng notes that, in Acts 7:55 f., Stephen, 'filled with the Holy Spirit', has a vision of 'the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God'. Thus, 'here we have

mention of God, Jesus the Son of Man, and the Holy Spirit'. And here, the invisible power of the Spirit 'is in Stephen himself', while 'God himself (*ho theos* – the God) remains hidden ... only his "glory" (Hebrew *kabod*, Greek *doxa*) is visible', and Jesus, 'visible as the Son of man [is] in throne community with the same power and glory' (Küng n.d.:152).

I prefer to say this. God, Christ and Spirit (2 Cor 13:13) – for the Christian community, these three belong together, because historical and experiential Christian piety links the trajectory of the all-governing Creator, the Christ or wisdom and will of God in person and the Spirit or dynamic power that gives and renews life. To live truly in response to the Creator's sovereign governance in nature and history – to be genuinely, existentially and practically responsive to it – one may take up the other-directed manner disclosed in Jesus as the Christ. In addition, to take up this other-directed manner in life, a skein that fulfills the interdependent dynamic of good and created life requires *metanoia*, or that we be turned, that our minds and hearts be reoriented, energised and enlarged by the work of the Spirit.¹

Practical significance

The practical significance of these reflections becomes apparent if we consider that, as it spread around the Mediterranean, the Christian movement encountered sharply dualistic belief systems that portrayed humans, as immaterial souls bound to physical bodies that mire them in a world of impermanence, change and suffering. These systems portrayed salvation as the release of the human spirit from its entrapment in the physical body and the material world. For example, Marcion of Pontus, who joined ideas such as these to Christian traditions, taught that the world was made of 'beggarly elements'. He accepted the redeemer god that he found in some New Testament writings but rejected the Old Testament law and the creator God of Judaism. He claimed that the redeemer remained unknown until Jesus Christ and he rejected any positive relationship of Jesus Christ with the creator (Pelikan 1971:73).

In this context, debates concerning the relationship of Creator, Christ and Spirit presented sharply contrasting theological visions with definite practical consequences. If the Creator is bad (or perhaps incompetent) and the created order works against redemption and renewed life in Christ and the Spirit, then piety shuns temporal existence in the material world. If, however, the Creator is also the God of grace who redeems and renews through Christ and Spirit, then the three share a common aim or purpose. Then, Christ and Spirit work in continuity with the Creator. Then, the created ordering of the world is gracious, working towards renewed life in Christ

¹These statements need elaborating, especially with regard to the Spirit, though I cannot reduplicate here anything like the more detailed outline earlier in this essay on biblical images and ideas of Christ and the New Testament. I develop my understanding of the Spirit in *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, 498–542, and in a more recent essay, 'I Believe in the Holy Spirit' (Ottati forthcoming). I claim that the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Christ who is also the Spirit of God, is the dynamic of genuine created and interdependent life and also of the community that has the same mind or attitude that was in Christ Jesus. Among other things, I emphasize that, in its manifold works, this Spirit is analogous to the ethos of a community that animates persons and to which they may be loyal.

and Spirit, and then, too, Christian piety gives thanks for the opportunity to participate in the created world. Few debates have had as many practical consequences for Christian piety and its picture of genuine human life. The decision to regard the gracious divine ordering as inclusive of the material world – of nature, history, the physical body, family, children, commerce, civil government, etc. – and to view all of these realities as parts of a good creation in which loyalty to God's redeeming purpose encourages us to participate – influences every dimension of Christian faithfulness.

Trinitarian believing links the all-ruling maker of heaven and earth with Christ the reconciler and with the life-giving and sanctifying Spirit. This is why it stands against dualistic theologies of redemption as release from a bad creation. This is why it rejects dualistic rejections of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as dualistic devaluations of life in the world. Trinitarian reflections retain the context of the Hebrew Scriptures and also insist that reconciliation in Jesus Christ and sanctification in the Spirit cannot be understood apart from this context. Trinitarian reflections assert that the Creator who makes and governs all things is also the Redeemer whose fundamental purpose is not suffering and decay but reconciliation and the renewed and true life of the kingdom that comes to us in Christ and the Spirit. Trinitarian reflections affirm that this world is the good creation of the one most excellent God who redeems.

This is not all. Because they are keyed to the Creator–Redeemer, trinitarian reflections suppose that there is something we need redeeming from. They probe the sinful corruption or fault that captivates persons and communities. They elaborate, too, on how divine judgment, reconciliation and redemption re-turn redirect and reorient corrupted creatures. However, in all of this, they avoid Marcionite dualism, and they continue to regard creation as the good gift of the gracious God who redeems.

The salvific dimension deserves to be highlighted. To affirm that the deity is Creator (the one by whose grace all things come to be and are sustained) and also good and graceful Redeemer (whose aim is new life and true life) leads to the confidence that God is faithful. God is not loveless power; God is gracious to and for what God has brought into being. Indeed, God's redeeming purpose is new or renewed being.

This affirmation entails a vivifying assurance and existential self-understanding. It expresses and shapes what Tillich called 'the courage to be' and what H. Richard Niebuhr regarded as a deliverance from distrust, or what I call the courage and resolve to live ec-centrally rather than grudgingly and defensively in God's good world despite the many anxieties, doubts and fears that beset us (Niebuhr 1963:118–126, 142–145; Tillich 1951). Trinitarian believing articulates and shapes the saving inkling and sense that to be is to live in relationship with the gracious Creator–Redeemer. Therefore, it is good to be. Therefore, it is appropriate to attend to the many others who also have been called into

existence, who also live and move in relationship with the gracious Creator-Redeemer and with whom we find ourselves standing in interdependent inter-relationships.

This sensibility is saving because it delivers us from the destructive defensiveness of being curved in upon ourselves, and it is also, I think, a basic accompaniment of justification by grace through faith (Ottati 2020:586–604). In the grips of the human fault, we are estranged, narrowed and diminished selves whose ways of negotiating life are anxious and alienated. Much classical theology, therefore, claims that the corrupted self is either pridefully relies on its own strength in a world that is often hostile to its inordinate and isolated interests or else slothfully abdicates responsibility in a threatening world. Either way, the self becomes something other and less than it ought to be. Either way, a train of bad consequences follows. The corrupted person turns in upon himself and shrinks away from an ec-centric existence attuned to participatory inter-relations with God and others. However, the saving inkling that accompanies trinitarian thinking – the sense that to be is to be in relationship with the gracious Creator-Redeemer – cuts against the grain of sin's diminishing, alienated and defensive movement, and it intimates a renewing confidence or assurance.

We believe in God the Father, the all-ruling Creator who bestows gifts of existence, life and sustenance in this good cosmos of interdependent creatures and things. We believe in Jesus as the Christ, the ec-centric person for others, who marks off a manner in life that accords with God's reign, and we trust in the Spirit, who renews ec-centric existence. Creation, reconciliation in Christ and sanctification in the Spirit all insinuate the knowledge that the self is neither isolated nor separate, but instead a being-in-relation-with-God-and-others called to live an other-directed life. We are to look to the interests of others (Phlp 2:4).

Is this knowledge of ourselves within a trinitarian frame of reference something new? Perhaps, since the radicality of Jesus's other directedness, for example, 'Love your enemies', is not often reduplicated in the annals of human morals. Indeed, Gustafson claims that, while: 'Christian ethics ... can in large measure be converted into "natural" or "rational" ethics ... they cannot be converted without remainder' due to their insistence on a love that may sacrifice one's 'own "immediate interests" for the sake of others'. I agree and note that as he makes this argument, Gustafson has in mind the substance of passages such as Philippian 2:4 (Gustafson 1975:163–165).

Does this knowledge of ourselves within a trinitarian theological frame simply restate something we already know? Yes, in some sense, it does, though (tragically) the knowledge or heartfelt wisdom often remains obscure to us. Why? Because the mind or attitude that was in Christ Jesus and the dynamic of life in the Spirit represents not departures from but elaborations and intensifications of the genuine vector of created and interdependent life, or of the direction

of true life that is the opposite of the way of Cain and the pride of Babel. Is Cain his brother's keeper? Yes, and in some sense, Cain knows that he is.

Thus, the other directedness of life in Christ and the Spirit links with a vision of humans that emphasises our inter-relations with others (persons, creatures and things). That is, trinitarian theology insists that we are enmeshed in a good but corrupted world of inter-relations and intersections and that, formed in the mind or attitude of Christ and in the ethos of the Spirit, a good human life takes on the characteristic of 'inclusive care'. Note in this regard, Leonardo Boff's claim that caring is an attitude or mode of awareness, concern and responsibility without which being is not human (Boff 2008:14–15). It is 'a being-in-the-world-with-others always in relation', an integral 'care for the other' and 'a way of being', where others are not limited to humans (Boff 2008:17, 72). I think that a trinitarian theology supports this view. Boff lists Jesus among 'exemplary figures of care' but also includes 'our mothers and grandmothers', St. Francis of Assisi's 'affection of the universal sibling' and Mahatma Gandhi's 'politics of care with the people'. He summarises his reflections by pointing to Feng Shui, 'the Chinese philosophy of care' linked with Taoism that focuses on the vital energy of *chi*. Boff says this presents 'an ecological-cosmic ethic of how to take care of the correct distribution of *chi* in our entire environment' (Boff 2008:120–122, 129–132, 138–141).

My point here is that, where we focus on inter-relations with the natural environment in which, graced with distinctive capabilities, we participate together with other creatures, inclusive care points towards notions of stewardship and caring management. Where we focus on participatory inter-relations with other persons – agents who, within limits, exercise capacities to integrate bodily, social and spiritual aspects of life – inclusive care entails a respect for the integrity of persons that pushes towards justice as the rough equality of opportunities to integrate life (Sundmann 2017:377–386).

Stewardship says the Christian ethicist Frederick V. Simmons recognises special human responsibilities and even our distinctive moral value as members of the broader community of creation, partly because of our distinctive capabilities, both technical and otherwise. He believes that the Christian idea calls for a complex and 'hierarchical nonanthropocentrism' (Simmons 2020:534, 545–548). In addition, as Pope Francis among others has noted, in our current circumstance, environmental stewardship also entails a notion of an 'integral ecology' that includes a heightened concern for diverse human cultures and communities (Pope Francis 2015:93–108). Respect for persons, as Martin Luther King Jr. suggested, recognises 'the sacredness of human personality' and the 'inherent dignity' of persons that comes through in the idea that we are created in God's image. It is also reflected, says King, in Immanuel Kant's insistence that people be treated as ends rather than means and in Martin Buber's claims for the importance of I-Thou relationships. Human life properly understood, or as truly known in relation to

God demands respect for the freedom of persons to exercise responsibility (King 1986:118–120). One need not be a trinitarian Christian to know things such as these, though, skewed by corrupted anxieties and interests, people chronically forget them, and I am less convinced than some, for example, Kant, that the ‘knowledge’ of inclusive care and/or respect for persons is readily and effectively available to rational agents.

This brings us to a final practical reflection. The manner of living supported by trinitarian believing is grounded in a courage-inducing apprehension of the God of grace and centered on a quality of inclusive care or attentiveness to others. However, doctrinally speaking, it can also be undercut by three kinds of Unitarianism (Niebuhr 1995:52–62).

There is a unitarianism of the Father, the creator or maker of heaven and earth. When measured against trinitarian thinking, it overlooks the particularity and personal pattern of Jesus Christ, and it forgets to look for a Spirit-empowered reorientation or change in ourselves. This variety of unitarianism tends towards a deistic and largely intellectual quest to comprehend the first cause and designer of the world. It stresses universal laws of nature and/or reason, but it balks at following Jesus and at talk of conversion or a change of heart.

A unitarianism of the Son forgets to fully appreciate and engage God’s dynamic power and presence in the world of nature and history, and it often fails to look for the grace of continuing forgiveness, repentance and sanctification in the empowering ethos or Spirit of creation, Christ and church. In our own time, this variety takes pietistic and moralistic forms. As pietism, it centers loyalty, worship and devotion on Jesus as Savior apart from a serious and world-engaging social ethic. As moralism, it tends to support a narrow and imitative legalism, a discipleship that separates from the world and may fail to appreciate that even those who follow Jesus finally rely on grace alone.

Third, there is a unitarianism of the Spirit that fails to appreciate and engage God’s goodness and presence in the world or nature, social structures and institutions and that tends to neglect the particular personal pattern or identity of Jesus as the Christ. Inner life, light and spirituality become fundamental, and the truth is sought in an inward awareness and like-mindedness. What then emerges is a comparatively amorphous spirituality focused on experiences of inward healing and renewal. Today, this variety of unitarianism sometimes supports a therapeutic stance that views participation in relationships, communities and institutions largely as a means to personal growth and that reduces Jesus to a healer or spiritual guide who makes few strident demands.

By contrast, as we have seen, trinitarian believing points towards the dynamic interaction of Creator, Christ and Spirit. It insists that genuine responses to God include a participatory

attention to and engagement with God’s world, an encounter with the disclosive and other-directed pattern or identity of Jesus as the Christ and a spiritual turning, reorientation or enlargement in the Spirit. The sense that the Trinity makes is that these three experiences indicate a single divine trajectory in relation to us. They point to a single dynamic excellence or glory that creates and bestows life, re-turns corrupted living and then sculpts it in an other-directed or ec-centric pattern, thus raising us up to new possibility.

Flying low

My low-flying reflections align me with Tillich, who wanted to reopen the doctrine of the Trinity, but even more so with Schleiermacher, who thought the orthodox doctrine, with its insistence on relations within God *a se*, both exegetically insecure and speculative (Tillich 1963:291–294). Again, like H. Richard Niebuhr and Gustafson, my intention is always to keep in view a radical faith or piety that forms people in a certain kind of life. For Christian theology as a practical wisdom, I think that the important trinitarian task is to articulate God’s excellence and grace in creation, reconciliation and sanctification, as well as what difference this makes for human living. I, therefore, find myself in substantial agreement with the following judgment of Hans Küng (n.d.):

According to the New Testament the key question of the doctrine of the Trinity is not the question which has been declared an impenetrable ‘mystery’ (*mysterium stricte dictum*), how three so different entities can be ontologically one, but the Christological question of how according to scripture the relationship of Jesus (and consequently also that of the Spirit) to God himself can be stated. (p. 153)

There are critical questions to be raised. For example, does my low-flying trinitarianism simply amount to Sabellianism? If I am correct, given that fact that there is in the Bible no explicit immanent Trinity, one should not surrender oneself too quickly to the panic that the mention of this not-too-well-understood heresy, may spread abroad in some quarters. Even so, to the extent that Sabellianism *denies* relations internal to God, it differs from my low-flying reflections, which simply remain agnostic with respect to that question – a point that accords with Rahner’s insistence that Sabellian modalism requires the affirmation that the diversity of God’s relations to us and to the world brings about ‘no difference in God’ (Rahner 1974:81). My question to both Sabellian and orthodox trinitarians is whether a serious reckoning with the *limits* of our theological knowledge might not have some salutary effects.

Return, then, to the matter of a trinitarian renaissance. Do my low-flying reflections qualify me as a participant? They clearly do if we focus on a renewal of interest in the doctrine. However, what if one asks for more? Then, the answer gets more complicated; it depends on whether one may be said to participate if one emphasises the doctrine’s practical significance but also is an explicitly revisionary critic of orthodoxy’s metaphysical heights.

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