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## In The Name Of The Father, Son And Holy Spirit: Constructing A Trinitarian Worldview

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It is part of the pathos of Western theology that it has often believed that while trinitarian theology might well be of edificatory value to those who already believe, for the outsider it is an unfortunate barrier to belief, which must therefore be facilitated by some non-trinitarian apologetic, some essentially monotheistic 'natural theology.' My belief is the reverse: that because the theology of the Trinity has so much to teach about the nature of our world and life within it, it is or could be the centre of Christianity's appeal to the unbeliever, as the good news of a God who enters into free relations of creation and redemption with his world. In the light of the theology of the Trinity, everything looks different. [Colin Gunton]<sup>1</sup>

A *worldview* is the framework through which we understand and evaluate existence. It is the set of assumptions we hold regarding the basic constitution of the world and our place within it. Whether it be eclectic or coherent, conscious or assumed, our worldview determines how we understand ourselves, other human beings and the values by which we function from day to day.

At the core of each basic worldview is the question of God. Our belief or non-belief regarding a divine Being is influential, if not determinative, for virtually everything else. A pantheist presumes that because God is everything and everything is God, the individual himself is innately divine. Because God (e.g., Brahma) is absolute unity, usually it is assumed that the world of particulars is illusion — thus one's human individuality is also mere illusion. To enter into oneness with this all-inclusive deity (itself apersonal, arational and amoral) a person must through one means or another erase his individual consciousness. When a worldview begins with an all-inclusive, apersonal deity, there is no final place for the human being or for ethics on either an individual or a social level.

Whereas pantheism has no place for the individual, polytheism (as in ancient religions, tribal animism, some forms of modern spiritism and Mormonism) allows a place for the individual but offers no absolute which unifies the universe. Without an infinite God, such cosmologies lack a sufficient framework that gives meaning to the particular and therefore to finite existence. For example, Mormonism asserts that God the Father is finite and in a process of development through a cosmic hierarchy of wives and offspring. Yet by what measure is God's development assessed? Without a truly infinite deity everything else becomes philosophically relative, if not arbitrary.

The atheist suffers a similar dilemma. Without an infinite point of reference, all particulars finally lack meaning. Nietzsche's *why* is lacking? Whether individually or collectively, the human being becomes his own criterion for determining all significance and values. To be sure, the individual has a place in atheism. But without an ultimate structure beyond himself that provides meaning, his freedom is finally meaningless. Postmodernism carries human pointlessness yet another step by rejecting not only faith but also rationality and hope for understanding ultimate truth.

Classical theism believes in a personal, infinite Being who created the universe out of nothing and the human individual in his finite personal image. As such, human ontology (one's fundamental personhood) is grounded in divine personhood itself. In theism, therefore, man has unique meaning and special distinction over all impersonal creation. Nevertheless, a monotheism which defends God as a single-personed being (e.g., Judaism, Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses) is markedly inadequate, and that for several reasons as will be shown.

By historic confession, a Christian worldview is centered in the Trinitarian concept of God. Through biblical revelation, we understand that the one God exists as three persons in dynamic relationship.<sup>2</sup> If Colin Gunton is correct (as cited above), the most powerful apologetic for Christian faith is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity with its broad-sweeping and extraordinary implications for human existence.

**The purpose of this monograph is to outline a transcultural Trinitarian worldview, one that attempts to define a universal framework of Christian faith for believers today.** It is presupposed that the biblical basis and historical development of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity are essentially correct as expressed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Rather than a detailed discussion of any single aspect, the work is designed to be a synthesis of important Trinitarian themes. **The seven-part overview presents the Godhead's internal and external relationships from before the beginning of creation, through various aspects as related to creation, and on to the eternal future.** These seven aspects of Trinitarianism are designed to serve as biblical-theological anchors which help unify varying contextualized Christian perspectives of faith from the different cultures of the world.

Of course, given the cultural plurality of "worldviews," such an attempt may already be viewed as misguided by some. It is said that each culture should develop its own theology, as has indeed been the effort by many since the 1960s. However, all classical Christian faith is heir both to Scripture and tradition, particularly in the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the hypostatic union of Christ. Moreover, with the unraveling of many Christian truths in the wave of contextualization in the 1970 and 80s, not a few in the "Third World" have expressed the need to reaffirm the central truths of Christian faith. Increasingly over the last fifteen years, evangelical and Roman Catholic theologians of various parts of the world — while continuing the process of theological inculturation — have also sought to *reaffirm* the essential truths of Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup> The following presentation attempts to construct an elemental Trinitarian structure that is transcultural, apologetic and practical for the life of the believer and the church.

## I. The Trinity Before Creation

Before any and all creation, God was completely self-sufficient and all-inclusive. All that existed was God. There was nothing that was not God.<sup>4</sup> Without beginning, the Supreme Being is infinite in each of his many characteristics. Yet rather than contain all opposites, God eternally chooses to be himself, and his choosing is forever expressive of his nature. God's attributes are not contradictory but rather entirely consistent with one another, for God is simple and God is one.

Moreover, the Supreme Being is profoundly personal. "Though alone" before creation, as Hippolytus remarks, "he was multiple."<sup>5</sup> In Holy Scripture, God reveals himself as three persons. Whereas order and function differ, each person is shown to be equal and one with the other, of the same essence and quality. Yet each is also eternally distinct as person.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the members of the Holy Trinity can be known and worshiped together as God, or known and worshiped individually as God.

Ultimately, this Most High God is mystery. Some aspects of the divine nature may not be revealed nor could they be comprehended by finite beings. Rather our understanding of God is based upon revelation given in a finite situation and in conditions that have meaning for us as finite beings. It is through God's grace in self-revelation (especially through Jesus Christ and the Bible) that he can be known. Yet what God has revealed of himself is true to what he is and fully sufficient to know and to love him.<sup>7</sup> We conclude that God, before any and all creation, existed as all-inclusive, self-sufficient and tri-personal as Holy Trinity.

## II. The Trinity And Impersonal Creation

Although some propose a created order that is co-eternal in the past with God, classical Christian faith affirms creation as being called into existence out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).<sup>8</sup> There was an absolute beginning to creation. When God created, he deliberately chose to limit himself because he created something that was not himself. In creating something out of absolute nothing, God no longer remained all-inclusive.<sup>9</sup> The rock, the tree and the animal were not God. In contrast to all pantheistic theologies, the God of the Bible did not flow or emanate out into the physical world.<sup>10</sup> To the contrary, all space, energy, matter and time exist as God's creation and artistry and not as his essence. Nevertheless, the existence of these dimensions is entirely sustained by the personal Creator's presence intertwined with creation while remaining wholly other.

The question of *why* God created is not easily answered, apart from the classical Christian response, "to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:12-13). Some deduce that the divine motivation for creation is best found in the overflow of loving self-givingness between the three persons of the Godhead. The deep love, goodness and joy of each member of the Trinity toward the other spills forth in the creation of that which is external to God, the realms of angels and mankind.<sup>11</sup> As such, all creation exists and is sustained, not by necessity nor by divine selfishness, but by the abundance of Trinitarian grace.

So, God brought the created order into existence out of nothing. He freely sustains it and is personally involved with all dimensions of existence. Yet the creator God is never to be confused with his creation.

## III. The Trinity And Personal Creation

Besides space, time and matter, the Triune God chose to create other *persons*. By creating finite beings in the divine image, God limited himself again. Now he was no longer the only personal and moral agent in existence. Unlike God, of course, all created beings are finite — whether in heaven or on earth (*e.g.*, it seems that Satan, though spirit, is not capable of being directly present in more than one place at the same time). In creating finite personal beings, God remained infinite but he was no longer personally and morally all-inclusive.

Contrary to the atheist and pantheist, the theist affirms that human personhood and dignity are based on the nature of the Creator. While broader than the commonly referred to aspects below, divine personhood includes the capacities of thought, volition and emotion: (1) God thinks and reasons in a logical manner, although not necessarily in the same thought patterns that we use;<sup>12</sup> (2) God chooses voluntarily, makes decisions and possesses absolute freedom of will;<sup>13</sup> and (3) the God of the Bible apparently manifests a multiplicity of emotions — all as a moral, purposeful Being. Just as Scripture establishes that each member of the Godhead reasons, exercises free will and manifests a plurality of feelings, so we as finite persons evince similar characteristics. Even at the turn of the twenty-first century, modern science is without response as to how the several pounds of chemicals and water that compose the human brain can express self-consciousness, intelligence, self-direction and a plethora of emotions. Creativity, aesthetic appreciation, dominion, moral motions and a sense of eternity seem also to be aspects of the divine image in which man is created.

Classical Christian faith asserts, therefore, that although human beings have fallen into sin and suffer the scars of the fall, the *imago dei* is not disfigured beyond recognition. In contrast to the existentialist and the determinist, the Christian has a basis to find meaning in all human activities and functions: in man's acts of creativity, kindness and justice; in his emotions of joy, sadness and anger; in his thoughts, language, scientific praxis and study of the objective history; and in the distinction between fantasy and reality. We are truly persons with eternal value because the Creator and Absolute of the universe is also personal and has made us for relationship with himself and others.

Not only is human personhood patterned after the divine, it is suggested that the *imago dei* includes the capacity to be indwelt by a spiritual being. As the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son, and as the Spirit is in the Father and the Son and bears them in himself (as “the Spirit of Christ” and “the Spirit of the Father”) — in brief, as each member of the Godhead mutually inhabits the other, in a similar way the human being is structured perichoretically, that is, for the indwelling of another (Jn 17:20-26). As corporal beings, we cannot inhabit one another (although human sexual intercourse approaches the same concept and therefore is sacred). But, because he images the divine persons themselves, a human being is capable of and designed to be inhabited by another. This is why a man or woman can be indwelt by the Holy Spirit or by a demonic spirit, while retaining his or her own individuality. The habitation by another personal agent does not replace or generally subsume the human being who normally retains some ability to yield or not to a spiritual presence. It is suggested, therefore, that the divine image includes not only personhood but also the capacity for indwelling by another as a reflection of divine *perichoresis*.<sup>14</sup>

## IV. The Trinity And Unity-Diversity In The Universe

Since the ancient philosophers, the tension between the unity and the diversity of the universe has been a major and enduring problem, largely without solution. The pole of absolute unity presents man locked in cosmic determinism. Whether religious or secular, the human being is ultimately a tiny part in a massive machine where he has neither control nor value. This is implicit in the *religious* determinism of Hinduism and Islam, and in the *secular* determinism expressed in aspects of behavioral psychology, health sciences and philosophies such as dialectic materialism. Conversely, the pole of absolute diversity presents the human being as free, yet within an absurd cosmos without purpose or direction. Without a unifying absolute, everything exists by chance and chance alone — a position expressed in secular existentialism and the works of many twentieth century artists. The human being is reduced to either a cog in a cosmic machine or an astronaut adrift in space with neither spacecraft nor planet in sight. If there is no infinite, absolute point of reference in the universe, then all of the particulars (the rock, the man, societal values, *etc.*) have absolutely no meaning. Moreover, if such a point of reference is to give significance to all existence, it must be personal — or more properly, it must be an infinite, personal Supreme Being.

Outside of biblical Christianity there is no structure that satisfies the tension between the one and the many.<sup>15</sup> Different from other forms of theism, the Holy Trinity as three persons in one God incorporates unity and diversity within itself. This divine reality is reflected in virtually all creation, be it in the estimated 50 billion galaxies spanning 500 million light years across the known universe, or in sub-atomic particles with their mysterious compositions of quarks, leptons and gauge bosons (where a single top quark can emit 30 billion volts of energy). Whether vastly enormous or incredibly small, the universe manifests unity in its diversity and diversity in its unity. There is order between individual components and the total scheme of creation.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to all other religions and philosophies, the concept of the Holy Trinity presents meaningful relationship between the one and the many in the universe. While Eastern Christendom has emphasized the diversity of the three persons in mysterious unity, and while Western Christianity has stressed the unity of the divine essence expressed in three persons, both views fit within the Niceno-Constantinople Trinitarian formula that has defined classical Christian faith through the centuries.

Summarily, then, the Trinity embodies unity and diversity within itself and that unity and diversity is reflected in all of God's creation. Every thing and every person has real significance because each is created by and finally exists in relationship to the Triune God.

## V. The Trinity And Humanity As Family And Society

Christian faith implies that apart from the tri-personal God of the Bible, human society lacks an adequate ontological foundation. Many in the twentieth century argue that personal relationships have become increasingly “without reason,” that language is meaningless, that loving intimacy is simply the rustle of biological hormones, that mankind's societal and “friendship” associations merely float “within the context

of no context.<sup>17</sup> In the midst of these anti-humanitarian affirmations, the Christian faith proclaims that family, friendship and social order assume profound meaning when we understand people as created in the communitarian image of the Triune God.<sup>18</sup>

Because human ontology derives from God's own relational reality, intrinsic to every person is the need and yearning for social relationships. We are in fact dependent upon interpersonal activity for even the most rudimentary elements of human development — for example, thought itself is dependent upon language, which is acquired within a social milieu. The Bible indicates that innate to mankind is the capacity not only to think, will and feel but also to commune at the most intimate and transparent levels with both the Creator and one another.

Because the divine image is described as male and female and because divine persons assume titles such as Father and Son, many in Christendom perceive the *imago dei* as *familias*.<sup>19</sup> In the Godhead, there is equality of nature yet distinctions of roles. The Holy Trinity shares deity without inferiority yet evinces eternal distinctions of relation and function within the hierarchy of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Although some today disagree, classical Christian faith has often drawn implications for the human family based upon essential equality with distinctive roles as husband, wife and children. Fundamental, however, in the divine example are the honor, love and self-givingness of each member of the Godhead toward the other.

Since the earliest church fathers, parallels have also been drawn between the Trinity and the church. Applications are drawn from divine unity-in-diversity, the headship of Christ over variously gifted believers, and the role of church leadership in light of the universal filiation and priesthood of every member. The *imago dei* as *ecclesia* has rich implications for the believing community on every level.<sup>20</sup> One clear implication is that as the Godhead prior to creation did not content itself with itself but brought creation into existence and then provided redemption to sinful mankind through the cross, so the local church is called to give itself to a lost world. As the Son and the Spirit are the two hands of God extended to a lost world, so self-sacrifice and mission are integral to the life of the church as the communitarian image of God.

Finally, too, the Trinity is sometimes set forth as *imago civilis*, a model of social and political structure.<sup>21</sup> Dictatorial models of political (and ecclesial) structures are as far removed from a Trinitarian worldview as are anarchistic and egalitarian structures in which all authority is rejected. While the sinfulness of the humanity in the world must always qualify socio-political applications, the doctrines of the Trinity and creation provide the foundation for absolute equality among human beings whatever gender, race or socio-economic class. Simultaneously, the Christian God serves as a model for order, authority and submission on a diversity of social functions..

As evidenced in the remarkable person Jesus Christ, therefore, the Christian faith leads us to the depths of our humanity. Rather than obscure our personhood and significance (as in both atheism and pantheism), biblical Trinitarianism is the seedbed in which our humanity grows to transcend horizontal limitations and blossoms red-bright in relationship with the infinitely personal God. In short, whether individually or socially, the human being fits nicely in the order of creation. In Trinitarianism, his humanity has found a home.

## VI. The Trinity, Love And Forgiveness

A significant characteristic of the Christian God along with moral perfection (holiness) is love. Divine love not only defines the intra-Trinitarian relations but also serves to unite the Creator with his creation, and even creation with other creation.<sup>22</sup> In that God is love, each person of the Trinity loves not so much himself but especially the other two persons. As defined in [1 Corinthians 13](#), love by nature is not directed inwardly but outwardly — as Richard of St. Victor observed — in the sharing and giving of oneself to the other.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to Islam, Judaism and other religions which defend God as exclusively one person, the Triune God of the Bible cannot be accused of selfishness or egocentrism. Nor is this God lonely, needing

someone to love, or with whom to communicate or to actualize himself reciprocally as Person. Not surprisingly, mono-personal concepts of God tend either to minimize divine infinity (so that God is perceived as personal) or to minimize divine personhood (so that God be perceived as infinite). In short, it seems from every vantage that for God to be infinitely personal and to be love, he must exist as at least two persons.<sup>24</sup> A mono-personal God is not “big enough” to be God.

In a similar way, the nature of **forgiveness** is a serious dilemma for non-Trinitarian theists. How does a holy God forgive? No human being is morally perfect as God is perfect. Yet if God, as Moral Absolute of the universe, shows mercy and forgives the sinner then he has violated his righteous justice. And if God exercises justice against the sinner, then he has denied his mercy. For a mono-personal God, compassion contradicts holiness, forgiveness is finally contrary to justice. God’s judgment and mercy are arbitrary, if not capricious. In Islam, Allah is believed to stand above the bridge of death that connects earthly life with paradise. Underneath this narrow bridge is the flaming chasm of hell. A man who lived a life of 90% good and 10% evil may be granted permission to cross the bridge of death into paradise. But a man with less virtue (85%) would be pushed off the bridge by Allah into the abyss below. The truth is that neither man nor woman can have any peace that Allah will forgive. Ultimately Allah must compromise his justice to grant mercy. Conversely, the Bible declares that God of Christian faith is both *just* and the *justifier* of those who believe (Ro 3:23-26). As tri-personal, the Christian God is the Holy Judge, the Sacrificial Lamb (who pays the price that divine justice demands), and the sanctifying Spirit who works in the fallen world convicting and leading sinners to salvation. With God’s absolute holiness satisfied at the cross, true forgiveness can be freely offered to all who believe.

## VII. The Trinity In Time And Space

Unlike the cyclical concepts of time in classical pantheism, the biblical perspective of time is linear; that is, history has a beginning, direction and finality.<sup>25</sup> The Christian faith takes objective history seriously. In this light, Judeo-Christianity is the only major religion with a large number of prophecies; more than one fourth of the Old and New Testaments is prophetic genre. God enters time and interacts in dynamic relationship with human beings. Simultaneously, this same sovereign God also exists above time, transcending time in any sense common to his creation.<sup>26</sup> Because time itself is a dimension of his own creation, God is not limited or restricted by time (although some would argue that he chooses to restrict himself). While there are mysteries left unexplained in revelation, it is possible that God may even stand above all time instantly, the end being as real as the beginning. But having affirmed God’s unique eternity (whatever the qualifications), we must also insist that the Godhead is not static or without dynamism. The Trinity is infinitely alive and personal within itself, and acts accordingly toward all his creation. As God enters linear history, he works in the life of each of human being in a way that is personal, authentic and free. While he may know of a non-believer’s refusal of faith in the future or of a believer’s moral failure during the next week, God personally relates to us — and often graciously — in the present.

Seen from a biblical viewpoint, time and space have beginning but they have no end. For example, the regenerate person becomes heir of eternal life, having himself a beginning but he never will cease to exist. This does not mean that he or she in the afterlife becomes timeless or omnipresent as is God himself (ideas of afterlife borrowed from Greek pantheism). Rather, the child of God will live forever with a glorified body in some form of linear time, although the categories and dimensions of time and space may be very different. Eternal life for the Christian means not atemporality but *everlasting* life filled with the plenitude of the Lord — a never-ending life of elevated quality. Conversely, those who reject God’s grace are destined to, in Jesus’ words, “*eternal* fire/punishment” (Mt 25:41,46). Although the nature of future existence seems very unlike the present, the basic categories of time and space will remain (“the new heaven and new earth”) as they appear essential to the existence of finite personal beings. God has committed himself forever to his creation.

Not only does the Holy Trinity operate dynamically in history, more remarkable still, God enters his creation. The Son has entered creation in the incarnation and further sealed his bond with creation through bodily resurrection and corporal glorification.<sup>27</sup> In Jesus Christ, spiritual and physical realities

were forever yoked together as the Logos assumed human nature and then a glorified body. Yet, as Athanasius (d. 373) expressed, “The Word was not confined within the body; neither was he there and no place else.” Instead, “when he was in human bodily form, he himself gave life to that body; and at the same time, he was giving life to the entire universe and was present in all things; yet he was distinct from the universe and outside of it.”<sup>28</sup> God the Son exists simultaneously inside and outside creation, not confined to but active within the orders of time and space. As with the Son, so the Holy Spirit continually works in history and particularly indwells the lives of believers, yet he too exists both inside and outside the created order.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Holy Trinity’s presence embraces creation and non-creation, preserving God’s transcendent reality while recognizing also God’s profoundly personal engagement within creation.

## Conclusion: The Trinity And Eternal Glory

Our outline has attempted to construct a basic Trinitarian worldview that is transcultural and universal. Perhaps, better said, it serves as a scaffold to begin the process. Yet certain affirmations can be made with relative certainty: (1) before any creation, the Triune God was self-sufficient and all-inclusive; (2) in creating *ex nihilo*, God is distinct from finite existence yet sustains it by his presence; (3) infinitely tri-personal, God created man and woman in his image, thus human ontology is grounded in the divine; (4) as three persons of one essence, the Trinity incorporates the unity-in-diversity reflected in all creation; (5) the equality-in-order of the Godhead informs proper social relationships for family, church and society; (6) as a plurality of persons, the Christian God can be both holy and loving, holding perfect justice and forgiveness together at the cross; and (7) the Triune God stands beyond all time and space yet is eternally committed to creation and mankind through Jesus Christ.

Nearly everything mentioned until now is related to our existence, our own limited experiences. However, if God existed as all-inclusive before creation, then he is now in all “places” and all “dimensions” where there is no finite creation or divinely ceded *nihil*. Surrounding and through the few dimensions of creation resides the infinite Lord, the Lord of all, exercising his magnificent character.<sup>30</sup> For those who are Christians, redeemed by the work of Christ at Calvary, finite creation constitutes an enormous crib over and around which the Triune God hovers, affectionately caring for his own. All creation will someday recognize the greatness and beauty of God, together with the unfathomable debt it owes to the Almighty for its existence, preservation and provision of salvation in Jesus Christ. This overwhelming understanding of our indebtedness to God may be our primary role as his creation. In glorifying the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit we are fulfilled as finite persons in the eternal plan of God. Nevertheless, there is no more blessed glory than that glory given by one member of the Holy Trinity to the other, each wholly comprehending and exalting the magnificence of the other.

## The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed<sup>31</sup>

- *We believe* in one God, the Father, *the Almighty*, maker of heaven and earth, of *all that is*, seen and unseen.
- *We believe* in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the *only* Son of God, *eternally* begotten of the Father,
- God of God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of *one Being* with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven; *by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary*, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered *death* and was buried. On the third day he rose again *in accordance with the Scriptures*; He ascended into heaven and *is seated* at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.
- *We believe* in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (*and the Son*). With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.
- *We believe* in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
- *We acknowledge* one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
- *We look* for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991) 7.

<sup>2</sup> Recent works on the biblical, historical and contemporary development of Trinitarianism include: E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1984); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. P. Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988); Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1993); Gordon H. Clark, *The Trinity* (Jefferson MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985); David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., eds., *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1989); Bruno Forte, *The Trinity as History: Saga of the Christian God*, trans. P. Rotondil (New York: Alba House, 1989); Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (new ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982); Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*; William J. Hill, *The Three-Personed God: The Trinity as a Mystery of Salvation* (Washington: Catholic Univ. of America, 1982); Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being Is in Becoming*, trans. H. Harris (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1976); G. A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, trans. E. J. Fortman (Still River: St. Bedes, 1982); Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1991); Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. M. Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Robert Morey, *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues* (Grand Rapids: World, 1996); Michael O'Carroll, *Trinitas: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Holy Trinity* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987); John J. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1988); Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970); William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); Christoph Schwobel, ed., *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995); John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994); Peter Toon, *Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1996); Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996); Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); and A. W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> See Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter, eds., *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism* (2d ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) and Ada Beanson Spencer and William David Spencer, eds., *The Global God: Multicultural Evangelical Views of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). In terms of Nicea, less orthodox attempts at reconceiving the Godhead are found in Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity* (New York: Paragon House, 1994); and L. Boff, *Trinity and Society*, where Jesus and Mary are prototypical of the eschatological hypostatic union of the Logos in all men and the Spirit in women.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian (d. c. 225) wrote, "before all things God was alone, being his own universe, location, everything. He was alone, however, in the sense that there was nothing external to himself." *Adversus Praxean*, 5. Zwingli echoed the same idea: "Since we know that God is the source and creator of all things, we cannot conceive of anything before or beside him which is not also of him. For if anything could exist which was not of God, God would not be infinite." "An Exposition of the Faith," in G. W. Bromiley, ed., *Zwingli and Bullinger*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London: SCM Press, 1953) 249.

<sup>5</sup> Hippolytus (d. c. 236), *Contra Noetus*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> The words *essence* and *person* are difficult to define, nor is there consensus as to their precise meanings within the broader structure of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Beginning with the oneness of God, the Western view has largely understood the divine *essence* (Lat. *substantia*; Gr. *ousia*) as a spiritual reality (the sum of divine attributes) expressed in three *subsistencies* — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From Augustine to Barth, analogies tended to conceive of Trinity in psychological terms (the threefold expression of one Being). Conversely, adopting social analogies, Eastern Orthodoxy focused on the relationships of three persons who share the same divine nature. Divine unity was confessed but left undefined (“mystery”) except in terms of *perichoresis* — the mutual indwelling of each member of the Godhead in the other. In the last thirty years, Western Augustinian-Thomistic essentialism has been increasingly set aside for Eastern Orthodoxy’s stress on Trinity as community.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Rahner is famous for his repeated argument that “the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa.” While most question the “vice versa,” few would deny that what God has revealed of himself in salvation history is true to what he actually is. Classical Christian faith holds that the biblical record reveals exactly but not necessarily completely (against Rahner) what God is in his transcendence and ontology. Against the Arians, the church fathers argued that God would exist as Trinity whether creation existed or not. At the same time, they employed biblical terms to articulate the eternal distinctions of the Godhead (while doing little to define the terms): the Son is *eternally begotten* of the Father and the Holy Spirit *eternally proceeds* from the Father and, in the West, from the Son.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jn 1:1-3; Ro 11:36; Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:2; 11:3; Rev 3:14. Leonard Verduin, in *Somewhat Less Than God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 11-13, questions the concept of *ex nihilo* creation, arguing that it assumes a time when God was uncreative — thus a state contrary to his nature. Verduin proposes a creation eternal in the past but ontologically dependent on God for its existence.

<sup>9</sup><sup>3</sup> The notion of God creating space within himself for creation is seen in mystical Judaism (the *zimsum* or self-limitation of God), Nicholas de Cusa, F. W. J. Schelling, E. Brunner and is articulated by Jürgen Moltmann in *God in Creation*, trans. M. Kohl (New York: Harper, 1985) 87: “1. God makes room for his creation by withdrawing his presence... The space which comes into being and is set free by God’s self-limitation is a literally God-forsaken space... 2. God ‘withdraws himself from himself to himself’ in order to make creation possible. His creative activity outwards is preceded by this humble divine self-restriction... 3. If God is creatively active into that ‘primordial space’ which he himself has ceded and conceded, does he then create ‘outwards’? Of course it is only through the yielding up of the nihil that a creatio ex nihilo is conceivable at all. But if creation ad extra takes place in the space freed by God himself, then in this case the reality outside God still remains in the God who has yielded up that ‘outwards’ in himself...” See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik II*, 1 (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1983); Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 376-396; O’Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God*, 159-182; and Thomas N. Finger, *Self, Earth and Society: Alienation and Trinitarian Transformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 306-312.

<sup>10</sup> Various modern theologians propose forms of Christian panentheism (all is in God but God is more than the material universe) where God is said to incarnate hypostatically in the material world: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of the Matter*, trans. Rene Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 15-102; Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr. *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1981); Sally McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) esp. 69-78; Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); and L. Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 230-231.

<sup>11</sup> Especially the Cappadocians taught that the purpose of the Christian life was to enter into Trinitarian fellowship through *theosis* or divinization — a theology that continues central to Eastern Orthodoxy. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (London: James Clarke, 1957) 67-134; Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, eds. J. H. Erickson and T. E. Bird (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1974) 97-140; Thomas Hopko, “The

Trinity in the Cappadocians,” in *Christian Spirituality. Vol. 1: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, eds. B. McGinn and J. Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 305-509.

<sup>12</sup> In non-theistic philosophy the reason for reason is largely lacking, often determined by arbitrary factors such as language and genetics. Christian theologians (E. J. Carnell, R. Nash, N. Geisler) often assert that principles of reason are based on God’s own character. See John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio* (1998); T. F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997); Norman Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974, 1982) 87-309; Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1961).

<sup>13</sup> Human choice or “free-will” is another phenomenon without adequate explanation in the non-theistic world, despite the fact that existentialism and humanism presuppose autonomous choice as foundational to their systems. Likewise, the pantheist has little if any explanation or place for human volition. Indeed, individual human consciousness (non-Atman) is what separates man from God, it must be denied in order to enter into unity of the All-Inclusive.

<sup>14</sup> This is argued more extensively in J. S. Horrell, “O Deus Trino que se d, a *imago dei* e a natureza da igreja local,” *Vox Scripturae* 6:2 (Dec 1996) 243-262. See [Jn 17:21-26](#). The Greek term *perichoresis* is often referred to in Latin as *circumincession*.

<sup>15</sup> See Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity. The 1992 Bampton Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1993); and R. J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Philadelphia: Craig, 1971).

<sup>16</sup> Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 142-161, observes that, against Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin’s static vision of the universe, Trinitarian creation better corresponds with recent scientific discoveries reflecting more “freedom” and dynamism in the structure of the universe. Also T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theory* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 160-206.

<sup>17</sup> From George W. S. Trow’s *Within the Context of No Context* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1981, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> See Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theology of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1990); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) esp. 243-317; John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985); and Donald Macleod, *Shared Life: The Trinity and the Fellowship of God’s People* (Fern, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> The Cappadocians understood the Godhead as communal, Basil even likening the Trinity to the first family of Adam, Eve and Seth (*Epistula* 38.4). Divine family has long been a secondary idea in Roman Catholic Mariology, as has (in all Christendom) the Savior’s self-sacrifice for the church as a marital model in [Eph 5](#). See also Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “The Perfect Family,” *Christianity Today* (March 4, 1988) 24-27; R. P. Stevens, “The Mystery of Male and Female: Biblical and Trinitarian Models,” *Themelios* 17:3 (April/May 1992) 20-24; and Randall E. Otto, “The *Imago Dei* as *Familias*,” *JETS* 35:4 (Dec 1992) 503-513.

<sup>20</sup> Tertullian, Clement of Rome, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria and the Cappadocians drew out various implications of a Triune God for church, although Luther and Calvin did not — Heinze Schutte, *Im Gespräch mit dem Dreieinen Gott: Elemente einer Trinitrischer Theologie. Festschrift für Wilhelm Breuning*, eds. M. Bohnke and H.-P. Heinz (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1985) esp. 361-362. See also Miraslov Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) esp. 191-220; Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (2d ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); and works in footnote 19.

<sup>21</sup>Notable works include Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*; L. Boff, *Trinity and Society*; Charles Sherrard MacKenzie, *The Trinity and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); Douglas M. Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); and John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, 106-123.

<sup>22</sup>In a helpful series, D. A. Carson, "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God," 1998 Griffith Thomas Lectures, Dallas Theological Seminary (pending *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:621-624 (1999)), discusses five different biblical foci of divine love: (1) the special intra-Trinitarian love; (2) God's providential love over all creation; (3) God's salvific love toward the fallen world; (4) God's peculiar selecting love toward the elect; and (5) God's conditional love toward believers related to their faith and obedience.

<sup>23</sup>Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), *De Trinitate*, 1.20, speaks of God as the Supreme Good and love: "It is never said of anyone that he possesses charity because of the exclusively personal love that he has for himself — for there to be charity, there must be a love that is directed towards another. Consequently where there is an absence of a plurality of persons, there cannot be charity." He goes on to say that the only adequate expression of this infinite love (and joy and glory) is toward another person of equal capacity to receive it and to respond in a like manner. Although in Scotland, Richard of St. Victor's elaboration on the Trinity as a community of love approximates the Eastern Orthodox perspective.

<sup>24</sup>Brian Hebblethwaite, "Perichoresis — Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Theology* 80:676 (July 1977) 257 states: "If personal analogies are held to yield some insight into the divine nature (perhaps because man is supposed to be made in the image of God), then there can be no doubt that the model of a single individual person does create difficulties for theistic belief. It presents us with a picture of one who, despite his infinite attributes, is unable to enjoy the excellence of personal relation, unless he first creates an object for his love. Monotheistic faiths have not favoured the idea that creation is necessary to God, but short of postulating personal relation in God, it is difficult to see how they can avoid it. There does seem to be something of an impasse here for Judaism and Islam. Hinduism, at least in its more philosophical forms, avoids this problem by refusing to push the personal analogies right back into the absolute itself. The personal gods of Hindu devotional religion are held by the philosophers to be personifications at a lower level of reality of the one absolute being, beyond all attributes. (Hence, incidentally, the so-called Hindu Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva is no real analogue for the Christian Trinity)" — as in Raimundo Pannikar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man: Icon — Person — Mystery* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973).

<sup>25</sup>Scripture includes micro and macro (creation-destruction-recreation) cycles in linear time. Christian and Trinitarian perspectives of time are discussed in: James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962); Emil Brunner, "The Christian Understanding of Time," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4 (1951) 1-12; Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. F. V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964); John J. O'Donnell, *Trinity and Temporality* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983); Arthur H. Williams, "The Trinity and Time," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39:1 (1986) 65-81.

<sup>26</sup>Church fathers debated the concept of eternity, some defending that God exists in time, others that God in his transcendence exists outside of time. Siding with the latter, Augustine, *The City of God* XI, 6, suggested that time was created along with the universe. The debate continues today between classical Christian theologians and process and freewill theism advocates.

<sup>27</sup>See T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London: Oxford Univ., 1969) and *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

<sup>28</sup>Athanasius, *De incarnatione*, 17.

<sup>29</sup>If not merely metaphorical, the language of Scripture suggests that God the Father also can assume finite form within the order of creation (e.g., "the Ancient of Days," "He Who Sits Upon the Throne") — as can the Spirit ("like a dove"). See Amos Funkenstein, "The Body of God in 17th Century Theology and

Science," in *Millenarianism and Messianism in English Literature and Thought 1650-1800*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988) 150-175, traces how God "lost his body" in Christian theology; and Robert W. Jenson, "The Body of God's Presence: A Trinitarian Theory," *Creation, Christ and Culture: Studies in Honour of T. F. Torrance*, ed. Richard W. A. McKinney (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976) 85-91.

<sup>30</sup>Thomas Finger, "Modern Alienation and Trinitarian Creation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17:2 (April 1993) 205: "As long as this space remains 'empty' enough for creatures to retain distinct identities, this image need not be panentheistic. I think it can help us conceive how the divine love is not really distant from our world, but still surrounds us; and how sin may not be running from God so much as pushing away the One who longs to draw near."

<sup>31</sup>From the *Alternative Service Book* of the Church of England (ICET, 1980) in Gerald Bray, *Councils, Creeds and Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1984) 206-207 (italics reflect the additions of the Council of Constantinople in 381).