Review & Expositor

A consortium Baptist theological journal

Vol. 99, No. 3 Summer 2002

Review and Expositor: A Retrospective Look

Published by Review & Expositor, Inc.
Founded and originally published by
The Faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

SPONSOR INSTITUTIONS

McAfee School of Theology of Mercer University
Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
Campbell University Divinity School

PATRON INSTITUTIONS

Central Baptist Theological Seminary
M. Christopher White School of Divinity Gardner-Webb University
Logsdon School of Theology of Hardin-Simmons University
Northern Baptist Theological Seminary

Louisville, Kentucky
2002

Practicing the Trinity in the Local Church: The Symbol as Icon and Lure

*by Kieran Scott**

For the Christian, to know God is to live Trinitarian. Living in a Trinitarian way, however, can be understood in two senses:

1. as *orthodoxy*, as correct believing, as the right perception of God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, and,
2. as *orthopraxis*, as right practice, as living out this perception in right acts.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is orthodoxy (right perception), and it calls for orthopraxis (right response). In both of these meanings, the doctrine is eminently practical. It emerges as the theological criterion to measure the faithfulness of the practices of the local church—its educational ministry, ethics, spirituality, polity, and worship. It can have far-reaching consequences for Christian living. This is the thesis I wish to pursue in this essay.

On first impressions, the thesis may seem overextended or exaggerated. In Christian communities, most consent to the doctrine in theory but have little need for it in their religious practice. The doctrine has the reputation of being an arcane and abstract theory that has no relevance to Christian practice. It has been relegated to the margins of the tradition, vexed theologians, puzzled preachers on Trinity Sunday, and frustrated parish religious educators. In fact, the late Karl Rahner once remarked that even if one could show the doctrine of the Trinity to be false, the major part of Christian literature could well remain virtually unchanged. So detached has the triune symbol become from the actual religious life of most people, he noted, that if people were to read in their morning newspapers that a fourth person of the Trinity had been discovered it would cause little stir or at least less than a typical Vatican pronouncement on sexual matters.[1]

But this was not always the case. In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa complained that one could not go into the marketplace to exchange money, buy

* Kieran Scott is Associate Professor of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University, New York.

bread, or go to the baths, without getting involved in a discussion about whether God the Son is equal to or less than God the Father. Gregory wondered whether this enthusiasm for divine discourse was the result of perversity, delirium or intellectual derangement. These lively debates in the public square on the Trinity would be hard to imagine today. This premodern doctrine is at the periphery of our postmodern religious consciousness, and has become unintelligible and religiously irrelevant on a vast scale. And, yet, we cannot do without a Trinitarian doctrine of God. It articulates the heart of the Christian tradition. The doctrine, potentially, offers a theoretical framework that yields a wisdom, a discernment, a guide for practicing the Body of Christ.

But why has the doctrine been neglected, evaded and appeared so esoteric that one could well do without it? This demise of the Trinity must be understood before it can be rejuvenated for postmodern culture and ecclesial praxis. My argument is developed in a four step process of exploration and discussion:

1. The God symbol: What's at stake?

2.The denouement of the Trinity;

3.Theological retrieval: Letting the symbol sing again; and,

4. The Trinity as a principle of action in the local church.

My assumption is:

The doctrine of the Trinity, hermeneutically revitalized, is bound up with every dimension of the divine-human relationship. It is a heuristic framework for thinking correctly about God, and ourselves in relation to God. In that sense, there is no doctrine as practical or that has such profound consequences for congregational living.

The God Symbol: What's at Stake?

In a religious context, a symbol is a word or an image that participates in the reality to which it points. The symbol opens up some understanding of that reality but never fully exhausts it. God is such a symbol for Christians. The word points toward inexhaustible mystery and, yet, allows us "to see through a glass darkly."

The symbol of God is at the center of the Christian tradition. It functions as the primary symbol of the whole religious system. And, like every symbol, it has evocative power. It is the ultimate reference point for the values of a community. " The symbol of God," Elizabeth Johnson writes, "represents what the community takes to be its highest good, its most profound truth, its most appealing beauty. It is the ultimate point for understanding personal experience, social life, and the world as a whole. In turn, the symbol of God powerfully

molds the corporate identity of the community, highlights its values, and directs its praxis."[2] *How* the symbol functions, then, seems crucial. And, a great deal seems at stake in *what* values and visions it evokes.

Gordon Kaufman, in *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*, deduces some examples from the above premise. A religion, he notes, that would worship a warlike God and extol the way he smashes his enemies to bits, would promote aggressive and hostile behavior as religious. A community that would acclaim God as an arbitrary tyrant would inspire its members to acts of impatience and disrespect toward their fellow creatures.[3] Continuing this line of deduction, Kaufman, in his *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, pushes his argument a step further. He claims a religious body that promotes a sovereign God, where God acting as king fights on the side of his chosen ones to bring their enemies down, risks endangering the planet with nuclear annihilation.[4] Sallie McFague, in *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age*, demonstrates the destructive ecological implications of a hierarchical, imperialistic and detached God.[5]

On the other hand, Kaufman and McFague show that the symbol of God can function in a very different way. Their constructive theological projects re-image a God appropriate to our postmodern time. A community that acclaims a beneficent, loving, and forgiving God, they note, turns the religious community toward care for the neighbor and mutual forgiveness. A religion that speaks of a relational God involved in the network of human and non-human relations inspires mutuality among people and care for the world as God's body. And, as feminist theologians have widely asserted, when our religious discourse names God in female and male terms, patriarchy and exclusivity are challenged and an inclusive communal vision emerges.

The symbol of God, then, shapes the life orientation of the faith community and guides its individual members. The symbol evokes our ultimate concerns. It is what our heart clings to most deeply and what we give our heart to most passionately. The holy mystery that the symbol represents undergirds the principles, choices, values and relationships of the communal body. As a symbol, it is never neutral or abstract. Rather it functions, for better or worse, to unify and express the community's world-view, its expectation of design and order for the world, and its foundational orientation to human life.

But we can legitimately ask: what determines *how* the symbol functions? A concise answer is: the way we talk about God. That is, the images and metaphors we attach to the symbol. In the Christian tradition, there is a right (orthodox) way and a wrong (heretical) way to speak about God. *The* specific Christian way of speaking about God is in Trinitarian terms. No Christian doctrine of God can cease to be Trinitarian in character. This is crucial to its perception of reality, and it emerges from the Christian people's deepest intuitions and feelings. The Christian God is a Trinitarian icon. Historically, this triune icon has functioned ambiguously in Christian communities. For an extensive period in Christian history, the Trinity suggested a God isolated from, and absolute ruler of, human affairs. In contrast, in an earlier period, the symbol of the Trinity represented the

indwelling of God, as a three-fold koinonia, in history. The latter functioned to call forth loving relationships in the community and in the world as the highest good. Positively, this understanding of the Trinity modeled the ideal of sacrificial love and service (agape) in relations. Negatively, it prophetically challenged social and ecological injustices. Here, the triune God is love, and empowers mutuality, equality and inclusiveness in relations. In this hermeneutical understanding, wherever hearts are healed, justice done, liberation won and the earth honored, there the human and non-human community reflects, in part, the Trinitarian God. But this understanding of the Trinity has *not* functioned for the last thousand years in the West.

The Denouement of the Trinity

Catherine LaCugna offers the striking metaphor of "defeat" regarding the downfall of the doctrine of the Trinity in recent centuries. The doctrine, she writes, has been neglected, literalized, treated like a fringe curiosity or analyzed with conceptual acrobatics completely inappropriate to its meaning (1991, 8 and *passim*).[6] LaCugna's work brilliantly traces the emergence and defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity, and its decline into becoming something hidden and esoteric. Her work chronicles the historical roots of the problem, but also attends to the contemporary challenge feminist theology poses to the doctrine. Appreciation of Trinitarian speech about God has lessened, LaCugna argues, due to two main factors:

1. the doctrine loosing its mooring in experience, and
2. feminist critique of the symbol as sustaining patriarchy.

She addresses these two distinct but interrelated causes.

Loss of Mooring in Experience

Trinitarian images, concepts and patterns existed from the first century in the sacred writings, liturgy and confessional statements of Christians. No doctrine of the Trinity per se, however, existed until the fourth century. The doctrine emerged in response to the Arian controversy. The early church from its origins struggled to interpret the meaning of the gospel. A set of difficult questions confronted it: How was the Jesus movement in continuity with Judaism? What was the role of Jesus in salvation? Is he the mediator of salvation? Who saves us? Is it God? Jesus? The Holy Spirit? Is Jesus on a par with God or less than God? In the early 300s, these questions reached a feverish pitch. Arius, a priest from Alexandria, vigorously maintained that God (the Father) is absolutely unique and transcendent. God's essence cannot be shared by another or transferred to another (such as the Son). The difference between Father and Son

was one of substance. For Arius, then, Jesus was "less than God"—greater, perhaps, than the rest of us, but still less than God. This view of Arius was officially condemned at the Council of Nicaea (325). Nicaea affirmed that Jesus is on a par with God, "of the same nature" as God, divine as well as fully human. Arius could not imagine God submitting Godself to the vicissitudes of time and matter. This was his basic heresy. But from the debate and controversy the doctrine of the Trinity was born.

This, however, did not settle matters. Not until the Council of Constantinople in 381 would there be an official pronouncement that the Spirit is God. But how do we explain Father, Son and Spirit as God? After Nicaea, theological explanations were given in philosophical terms. Arius pushed theology toward ontology. The Cappodocian Fathers, Basil (d.379), Gregory of Nyssa (d.394), and Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390) formulated the Trinitarian doctrine in its classic form: God is one nature, three persons. This Greek theology had a dynamic understanding of God. We cannot know what God is, but we know God from God's "operations" or "energies." When the Cappodocians wrote about the relation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to each other, they always had in mind the divine persons in the economy of salvation. God is unimaginable severed from the world or divorced from the redemptive work of Jesus. Athanasius (d.373) captures this in his well known statement: "God became human that we might become God."

In the Latin West, however, Trinitarian theology took a very different trajectory. This metaphysical approach starts with the one divine substance, the"Godhead" that the three divine persons share in common. With Augustine (d.430) leading the way, Latin Trinitarian theology emphasizes divine nature rather than divine persons. It became an exploration of God in Godself in an eternal, intra-divine realm, in contrast to, God for us in the economy of salvation. In technical terms, it was a shift from Trinity *pro nobis* to Trinity *in se*. Augustine pursued his argument employing psychological analogies. The internal workings of the human being, he wrote, analogically correspond to the internal life of God. Augustine's perspective would win the day and influence Trinitarian theology for a millennium. However, it was a pyrrhic victory. The doctrine lost its footing in the concrete details of salvation history, severed its connection to religious experience and became remote from practices of congregational life.

The focus was now on God's "inner" life. The key question became: how are Father, Son and Spirit *related to each other*? The image we get is of a heavenly committee of persons enclosed in a circle or arranged in a vertical row. It is as if God is sighted through a high powered telescope and the internal interactions of the three persons are intended to be taken literally. In Karl Rahner's phrase, God is viewed as a Trinity "absolutely locked up within itself" and does not touch our lives.[7] Trinitarian theology now became abstract, impractical, a-historical, immune to the concerns of ecclesial, spiritual and liturgical life. In a word, the doctrine became divorced from the life-giving experiences that gave it birth in human understanding. For LaCugna, this was the defeat of the Trinity.

Feminist Theological Critique

To add to the Trinitarian woes stated above, contemporary feminist theology has confronted the classic doctrine of the Trinity with a set of additional problems. It is seen as a stumbling block to the concerns of Christian feminists by sustaining the patriarchal subordination of women. In an effort to counteract this, the symbol is critiqued on two fronts: its male imagery and the hierarchical pattern of divine relationships.

God is named Father, Son and Spirit in the doctrine of the Trinity. This exclusive male imagery is the first difficulty feminists face. It reinforces the assumption of a male God within a monarchical framework. The symbol points implicitly to an essential divine maleness. The male is *imago Dei*. The same can not be said for the female. This exclusive focus on masculine images pervades theology, liturgy and catechesis. It has functioned to cast men into superior roles and women into dependent ones. In a word, it has given religious legitimation to patriarchy.

Elizabeth Johnson challenges this male hegemony and embarks on a reconstruction of doctrine of the Trinity intentionally using only female metaphors.[8] Sallie McFague points out that the problem is not that God is imaged as Father but that Fatherhood has become the root metaphor for God. Her Trinitarian reconstruction names God as Mother, Lover and Friend.[9] Some critics see her proposal as more Unitarian than Trinitarian. Catherine LaCugna cautions us, however, not to be like Arius. Arius, it has been said, did not know a metaphor when he saw one. LaCugna reminds us of the propensity to literalize metaphors for God and to forget the dissimilarity in every analogy. The Father-Son analogy is simply that, an analogy. Any analogy, she notes, would have sufficed if it expressed relationship between persons of the same nature (e.g., Mother-Daughter, Father-Daughter, Mother-Son). The Father-Son analogy emerged naturally at the time. It communicated that God is personal and that equality existed between Father and Son. Rather than concede that God the Father is male as patriarchy defined it, the opposite claim is made. This is a God of mutuality, equality and inclusiveness. "One can affirm the doctrine of the Trinity," writes LaCugna, "and also use the metaphors of Father and Son, without consenting that God is male."[10] Trinitarian theology, then, is not inherently sexist and patriarchal. The doctrine of the Trinity envisions a relational God of love, mutuality, self-giving and self-receiving. Ironically, these values are the leitmotif of Christian feminism.

The second objection raised by feminist theology is the hierarchical pattern of divine relations. This seems to compromise the feminist concern for equality among women and men. In the Trinitarian schema, the first person is the principle and originating source of divinity itself. The Son and Spirit emanate from the Father. Such a model carries an implicit subordination. Elizabeth Johnson argues, "When the model used . . . focuses on the procession of first to second to third, a subtle hierarchy is set up and, like a drowned continent, bends all currents of Trinitarian thought to the shape of the model used. Through

insistence on the right order of certain processions, ontological priority inevitably ends up with the Father while at the other end of the procession the Spirit barely trails along."[11] The basic metaphor, she notes signifies an order of precedence. In spite of a built-in corrective in the classical model that insists on the radical equality of the three persons, Johnson claims the image falters and is not capable of bearing the burden of mutuality. "Different metaphor systems are needed," she writes, "to show the equality, mutuality, and reciprocal dynamism of Trinitarian relation."[12] This is the project she embarks on in *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse.*

Catherine LaCugna has empathy with Johnson's project. On the other hand, she cautions against slipping into a debate about "intra divine" equality. Fundamentally, the Trinity is not an account of God's self-relatedness. Its chief concern is not how Father, Son and Spirit are related *to each other,* but how the triune mystery is related *to us.* The genius of the Cappodocians was to assert that Godhead originates in personhood. Personhood is being-in-relation-to-another, someone toward another. This is the ultimate organizing principle of reality. The title Father simply means the essential relational and personal nature of God. There is no primacy of one person over another. "Trinitarian monotheism," LaCugna writes, "preserved the principle of shared rule and banished once and for all—at least theoretically—the idea that any person can be subordinate to another."[13] Furthermore, she warns feminism against the temptation of projecting onto an intra-divine realm its vision of what it hopes would happen in the human sphere.[14] This could leave feminism defenseless against the charge of ideological imposition, and methodologically tie it to the wrong starting point—and end point, namely, God's inner relatedness. The doctrinal Trinitarian God, on the other hand, is God for us. There are not two sets of communion—one among the divine persons, the other among human persons. The God of the Trinity dwells among us in communion. Hierarchy is found to be unorthodox. Feminist theology can resonate with these sensibilities. The defeat of the Trinity, then, does not rest at the feet of feminism. Ironically, however, its reemergence and revitalization is, in part, the fruit of contemporary feminist wisdom.

Theological Retrieval: Letting the Symbol Sing Again

Initially, the various and serious challenges to the classic doctrine of the Trinity seem to threaten a foundational Christian symbol. The critiques, however, may in Bonhoffer's words, be a providential clearing of the deck so that the relational Christian God can be rediscovered. Striking creative and imaginative efforts have been underway to do just that. The efforts at retrieval have involved three distinct but related tasks. This work has revolved around:

1. re-rooting the Trinity in the experience of salvation,
2. re-discovering the metaphorical nature of Trinitarian speech, and,
3. re-connecting the symbol to thoughtful practice (praxis).

I will proceed, in turn, to explain each of these tasks.

Re-rooting the Trinity in the Experience of Salvation

Catherine LaCugna draws our attention to an icon of the Trinity painted by the fifteenth-century Russian artist Andrei Rublev. The icon is inspired by the story of Genesis 18. It depicts three angels seated around a table on which there is a eucharistic cup. In the background is a house and a tree. Genesis 18 tells a story of extraordinary hospitality. Three strangers arrive at the home of Abraham and Sarah. They are invited into their household to share their resources. Sarah bakes bread and Abraham prepares the meal. During the meal, the strangers offer their hosts the pledge of a child who will carry on the promise. In Rublev's icon, Abraham and Sarah's home is transformed into a temple, the dwelling place of God. The oak tree stands for the tree of life. The position of the three figures is very suggestive. They are arranged in a circle inclining toward one another but the circle is not closed. Intuitively, there is a sense that one is not only invited into the (triune) circle but that one is already part of it.

Rublev's Trinitarian imagery suggests that the mystery of God is not a self-contained God, or a closed divine society. The archetype is of hospitality. The image is a communion in relationship. The triune figures invite the world to join the feast. The divine communion is loving, open to the world and seeks its nourishment. And the eucharistic cup in the center is the sacramental sign of our communion with God and with each other. LaCugna observes, "This icon expresses the fundamental insight of the doctrine of the Trinity, namely, that God is not far from us but lives among us in a community of persons."[15] This seminal insight LaCugna retrieves from the Cappodocian fathers.

Today Trinitarian theology is being creatively and fruitfully recovered. This is due in part to the rising interest in liturgy, spirituality, world religions, and the attempt to find a solid theological basis for praxis. Reclaiming the wisdom of the Cappodocians resonates with postmodern sensibilities and lays the groundwork for revitalizing the doctrine. The first task in this revitalization is to root the Trinity in the experience of salvation.

All religious doctrine springs from an encounter or experience with God. This is also true of the Trinity. It is a symbol that developed historically out of the religious experience of a people. The early Christians came to see that their encounter with Jesus of Nazareth was nothing less than divine. Salvation has been offered to them in his ministry. But, after his death and resurrection, they continued to experience his saving grace through the presence and activity of the Spirit in the community. For them, God was utterly transcendent. On the other hand, they could sense God's spirit in their communal experience. In other words, they experienced the saving God in a threefold manner, as beyond them, with them, and within them. Consequently, they began to express their idea of God in this (Trinitarian) pattern. Salvation came from God (the Father) through

Jesus (the Son) in the Holy Spirit. With this articulation, the Christian conception of God as Trinity was born. But it was born from their religious experience, and inextricably linked to the saving work of Jesus. The Christian God is liberating in history. The mystery is not an isolated monad but a living communion in relation with the world. This is a God to us and for us. It was the genius of the Cappodocians—Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus—to imaginatively capture this profound truth in terms rooted in human experience.

The initial concern of the Cappodocians was with our salvation, not with metaphysics. Consequently, the economy of salvation is the basis, the context, and the final criterion for every statement they make about God. The Cappodocians made *person* rather than substance their primary ontological category. This radical move asserts that God is personal, not impersonal. Father, Son and Spirit are relational terms indicating God's relation to us. A person is a being-in-relation-to-another. The essence of God is to be in relationship to other persons. This triune mystery of persons in communal relations points to the life-giving nature of divine life. God by nature is outgoing love and self donation. As LaCugna notes, "If God were not personal, God would not exist at all."[16] The Trinity, then, is a theology of relationship. The symbol reveals truth about the mystery of God, and reveals us to ourselves. To be is to be in (personal) relations. God reveals Godself in the depths of relationality. This was the God revealed in the salvific work of Jesus of Nazareth. And, it is the same Spirit of God revealed in our salvific Christ-like relations today. At this point, the doctrine of the Trinity becomes meaningful again. It is re-rooted in personal experience from which it first sprung.

Re-discovering the Metaphorical Nature of Trinitarian Speech

The second task in revitalizing the doctrine of the Trinity is a renewed appreciation for the doctrine of analogy. Traditionally, the doctrine of analogy was meant to provide a way of speaking of God which allows for both similarity and difference between God and the human. It became a sensitive and indirect way to speak about God. All our religious language is analogical or metaphorical. A metaphor contains an *is* and an *is not*: God *is* and *is not* like a father, mother, spouse. The linguistic tension in the metaphor forces the mind to seek meaning at a deeper level. A literalized metaphor, however, paralyzes the imagination. When we literalize God metaphors, we create an idol. We assimilate God to human categories. Theological feminism is, in part, a critique of our propensity to literalize metaphors for God. Frequently, our discourse on the Trinity is conducted in implicit literal and descriptive language. This shows up in two ways:

1. in the key notion of person, and
2. in the numbers one and three.

In the Trinitarian doctrine, person is symbolic language. It is not intended to be taken literally. There are not three distinct somebodies, with three distinct centers of consciousness. This is tritheism. Person refers to God only indirectly, metaphorically. Person indicates relationship, freedom, the capacity to love and be loved, to know and be known, to be distinct but connected. The concept person reminds us that no metaphor is adequate to name the mystery. This is the case also for the numbers one and three.

The words one and three seem to stand for mathematical quantities. But this is not the intent of the doctrinal language. The words do not refer to numbers in the usual sense. The language is analogical. Elizabeth Johnson writes, "To say that God is one is intended to negate division, thus affirming the unity of divine being. To say that the persons are three is intended to negate singleness, thus affirming a communion in God."[17] God is at one with Godself and, simultaneously, in communion with the world. God is not a mind bending mathematical puzzle but a one God who is disclosed in communal relation. Trinitarian speech, then is metaphorical. It is like a finger pointing to the moon (Augustine). It ought not to be confused with the moon. When we re-discover the allusive character of this speech, the doctrine comes alive.

Re-Connecting the Symbol to Thoughtful Practice

The third task in revitalizing the Trinity is to link doctrinal orthodoxy with correct religious practice, namely, orthopraxis. As Paul Ricoeur notes, the symbol gives rise to thought. It has an evocative power that calls for a response. In other words, the symbol functions. Likewise, a creative retrieval of the Trinitarian symbol functions. It calls for a right response. The symbol is an icon that lures toward thoughtful religious practice. The (symbolic) doctrine suggests living. And, in light of the retrieval noted above, living out the doctrine amounts to living God's life with one another. No separation can exist between the content of the doctrine and the essential acts of believers. Correct perception is inseparable from correct practice. To believe Trinitarian gives rise to Trinitarian living, i.e., it evokes a moral response. This guarantees that the Christian doctrine of God is intrinsically connected to every dimension of life where God and creature live together. It is, then, immensely practical. This is what the doctrine has been severed from during its defeat. With its revitalization, however, it grounds our Christian praxis. In a word, it entails living as Jesus did. The implications of this Trinitarian discipleship are the subject of the final part of this essay.

The Trinity as a Principle of Action in the Local Church

From the beginning Christians confessed and prayed to God the Father, through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. This confession and pattern of prayer signaled a new religious identity. It meant the church's life is to mirror God's life. It is to be an icon of God. In its corporate life, its structures and practices, it

is to embody the nature of God. In other words, it is to practice the Trinity (or, in the words of Paul, be the Body of Christ). Principles can be gleaned from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and applied to the ethical, spiritual, political and educational life of the church. The implications can be transformative and the consequences radical for Christian practice. We can now take up this theoretical framework of the Trinity and see how it yields a wisdom and can act as a guide for Christian congregational living.

Ethical Transformation

A Trinitarian theology of God is the proper theological basis for Christian ethics. Ethics pertains to right actions of persons. Humanity is created in the image of God, and God exists as a personal communion of love. The very essence of God is to be in relations. The symbol indicates also the particular kind of relatedness: one of genuine mutuality in which there is radical equality while distinctions are respected. The symbol functions. It evokes a moral life of a reciprocal exchange of love. We are called to be persons: being from and for others. This Trinitarian ethic contains within it a critical principle that can act as a prophetic protest against the individualistic and utilitarian ethic of today. To be fully a person is to be personal, communal, self-giving and self-receiving. A solitary, impersonal, self-centered life is morally unnatural. It is unorthodox. Orthopraxis is right actions for persons. It consists of everything that supports and promotes the flourishing of persons. Whatever promotes communion amid diversity and strife, whatever enables us to live a life of virtue, whatever cultivates habitual practices of compassion and care, whatever frees us from narcissism and making idols of things—these are the staples of a Trinitarian moral life.

Trinitarian ethics, however, is not generic but Christological. The proper context for its discussion and discernment is the economy of salvation. Jesus is the embodied face of God for Christians. And a key criterion for Christian understanding of divine mystery lies in Jesus' preaching of the reign of God. The God whom Jesus preached is in solidarity with the slave, the sinner, the poor, the marginalized and with the least of persons. Followers of Jesus the Christ are exhorted to be icons of Christ. He is the criterion of what we are to become. In Christ, divine love is to be inclusive, healing and uniting. The "God brought low" in Jesus is the God whose face is seen in the poor, the oppressed, the other, not in the rich, the powerful and the privileged. When we are Christ to each other, the reign of God is made present for the transformation of the world. A Trinitarian ethic, then, is at once personal and relational. It is inclusive of every human concern and commitment. The focus of its attention will be the "last and the least" in the world.

This moral vision cannot forecast programmatic remedies for elitism, materialism or sexism, etc. And we should avoid the temptation of projecting our own social or political ideology onto the "inner" life of God. However, the

doctrine of the Trinity does contain moral insights that can function as a critical principle against all nontrinitarian forms of life and evokes a creative alternative vision of a transformed moral order. Political and liberation theologies today rightly perceive that a doctrine of God cannot be unrelated to the specific ethical, economic and political demands of the Christian life.[18] Feminist theologies have tapped into the doctrinal vision for a reshaping of the pattern of human/ecological relations and for a reconstructing of a sexual ethic.[19] Christian social ethicists find in the Trinitarian doctrine a framework for grounding the discussion of human rights in a communal context.[20] And, ecclesiologists elicit from the symbol a vision of the church's social mission.[21] In short, a Christian ethical life means walking in the ways of God, walking in a transformed Christ-like manner. It is living the Christian life in response to the Spirit.

Spiritual Transformation

Spirituality is undergoing a widespread renaissance today. The interest is phenomenal and touches multiple levels on our society. The new literature attempts to respond to the deep yearnings of contemporary men and women. There is a hunger, a quest beyond materiality. There is also a deeply felt need to overcome the fragmentation of modern life. The "new spirituality" holds the promise of healing the world's splits.

There is a danger, however, in some of the new spiritualities. There is a premature jump into unity with high-level generalities and abstractions. The orientation lends itself to a Disneyland or cafeteria-style choosing, a fuzzy concern and love for the whole world but for no one in particular. This popularized spiritual quest is tailored to the individual's privatized needs and desires. It is shaped by consumer impulses and captive to a therapeutic culture. It is as if we can save ourselves by ourselves if we would turn toward developing our own spiritual center. This is a privatized and rootless spirituality. Frequently, it is in reaction against organized religion and detached from its disciplined practices.

L. Gregory Jones offers a scathing critique of this genre of popular spiritual works.[22] Too often, he observes, popular spirituality invites the individual to be a tourist, to go on brief forays, sampling exotic 'lands' of ideas and techniques. The journey, however, is without *telos*. It systematically avoids the spiritual practices necessary for engagement with God.[23]

The focus of much contemporary reflection on the Christian spiritual life remains rooted in personal sanctification achieved by a journey inward. The current emphasis on the close linkage between psychology and spirituality undergirds this direction. This has given rise to a narcissistic preoccupation with the individual's spiritual life. This one-sided emphasis turns inward through withdrawal from the world, from human concerns and ethical responsibility for transformation of the world. Salvation becomes a solitary quest. Holiness is identified with standing apart and setting aside. Prayer becomes introspection.

This is a gross distortion of the richest meaning of spirituality and its path toward holiness. Trinitarian spirituality, however, takes a dramatically different form.

All authentic Christian spirituality, note La Cugna and Downey, is *ipso facto* Trinitarian.[24] Its understanding must be grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity. Trinitarian spirituality is no less than Christian life in the Spirit—a life animated by the Spirit of God, participating in the very life of God. It is a process of "deification." Specifically, in a Christian context, life in the Spirit is life in Christ. It is becoming like Christ ("ingodded" or "christified"). This "deification" of the human person involves modeling Trinitarian life. It involves boundless self-giving, pouring out love for the sake of life. It naturally connects with the ethical demands of the Christian life. It creates inclusive community among persons and helps bring about the reign of God.

Trinitarian spirituality, then, is incarnational. It is rooted in the practice of everyday life. It is a style of life, a way of being in the world in light of the Mystery. Prayer awakens us to the contemplative dimension of everyday living. Holiness is becoming whole, moving toward unity with the self, the other, the All. The imitation of Christ means fulfilling this vocation. The saints among us are those who answer this call and convert to this way. This is a personal and communal spirituality, and economic and ecological spirituality. It has justice at its center. Here there is no split between the contemplative and the active. They are a rhythm in one's life. And, this rhythm will center our lives and help us find peace. In other words, we will be transformed.

Political Transformation

While the doctrine of the Trinity is the product of patriarchal culture, its hermeneutical rejuvenation allows it to function as a protest against patriarchal governance. It can be the basis for a Trinitarian ecclesiology. While various members of the ecclesial body have experienced its life as exclusive, discriminating, unjust and oppressive, the symbol does provide the critical principle against which we can measure present institutional arrangement.

The doctrine reminds us that the *arch* or rule of God is the *arch* of love and communion among persons. Among the three there is no domination and subordination, no first and last. In God there is no hierarchy nor inequality, neither division nor competition, but only unity in love amid diversity.

The Christian community is to mirror this inclusivity and reciprocal power. It is simply unorthodox to claim subordination in ecclesial government. The symbol calls us to a community of equal discipleship, a kinship of sisterhood and brotherhood, equal partners in mutual relations. When we are baptized into the community, we acquire a new identity. Previous patterns of relationship are reordered. We "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). Alienating patterns of domination and division are thrown off. We are re-born into new life. Patriarchal power dies and is transformed into emancipatory communal empowerment.

The doctrine of the Trinity does not specify the exact forms of structure and community appropriate to the church. However, it does evoke our questioning. As Catherine LaCugna notes, it suggests, "we may ask whether our institutions, rituals, and administrative practices foster elitism, discrimination, competition . . . or whether the church is run like God's household: a domain of inclusiveness, interdependence, and cooperation."[25] Like Rublev's icon, the church is called to be a Trinitarian sign of love and reciprocity. Only a community of profound mutuality of power corresponds to the triune symbol. This koinonia form of life would be a prophetic counter-cultural presence in the midst of our bureaucratic institutional life patterns.

Educational Transformation

Finally, a legitimate claim can be made that the Trinity ought to form the basis of the Church's educational practices. It is not overextending the symbol to relate it to educational ministry. This can be done briefly in two ways: 1. attending to educational design, and 2. pedagogical processes.

Education begins with creation of design, or more accurately, reshaping the present design.[26] Educational life forms already come formed. The best the teacher can do is work with learners and environment to improve the given design. The term "design," Gabriel Moran writes, "attempts to capture both the express intent of the human teacher and the material limits of what can be taught."[27] The student enters an already formed physical environment. For change or learning to take place, this involves the reshaping of the human organism in relation to its environment. To teach, then, is to show how this is done. It requires changing the existing design that relates the person's activity and the environment.

What does this mean for educational ministry? The answer seems logical: education in the church begins with the creation of Trinitarian designs. The teacher's task is to give God-like shape to educational space. This involves fashioning an aesthetic, communal environment that evokes transformation. By re-designing ecclesial learning environments in Trinitarian patterns, we open up possibilities for refashioning the people of God.

The Trinity can also be an icon for pedagogical processes in the church. The symbol gives rise to thoughtful conversation. Students are invited into a relationship of mutuality, equality and reciprocity. Depositing knowledge or beliefs into "empty" heads is unorthodox. Knowledge and interpretations are socially constructed. The dialogue honors solidarity, diversity and the otherness of the written texts and human texts. Teaching is from and for others. It is vocational work. The teacher in educational ministry is the guardian of the tradition. If this custodial work is done in a Trinitarian manner, the tradition can flower into richer meaning. It will be transformed.

The thesis of this essay is that the central theme of the doctrine of the Trinity is relationship: God's relationship with us and our relationship with one another. The symbol simply, but profoundly, articulates our understanding of salvific "right relations." Far from being an abstract speculative doctrine to which Christians pay lip service, belief in the Trinity is a matter of our human life, death, and life forever.[28] The ancient doctrine is a reminder that the Trinitarian God is an icon of the local church. And the triune symbol is its lure to practice the reign of God. This is the triumph of the Trinity.

---

[1] Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 9-21.

[2] Elizabeth Johnson, "Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again," *Theology Today* 54/3 (1997): 300.

[3] Gordon Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination : Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 187-89.

[4] Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985).

[5] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Phildelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

[6] Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 8.

[7] Rahner, 17.

[8] Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads, 1992).

[9] McFague, *Models of God*.

[10] LaCugna, "The Trinitarian Mystery of God," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis S. Fiorenza and Johan P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 182.

[11] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 196.

[12] Ibid., 197.

[13] LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine M. LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper), 88.

[14] LaCugna, *God for Us*, 267-78.

[15] LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 83.

[16] Ibid., 87.

[17] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 204.

[18] Anne Hunt, *What Are They Saying about the Trinity?* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998).

[19] Johnson, *She Who Is*, and LaCugna, "Making the Most of Trinity Sunday," *Worship* 60 (1986): 210-24.

[20] Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, "The Trinity and Human Rights," in *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology*, 55-73 (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998).

[21] T. Howland Sanks, "The Social Mission of the Church in Its Changing Context," *Louvain Studies* 25 (2000): 23-48; and Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity Is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14/3 (1998): 403-23.

[22] L. Gregory Jones, "A Thirst for God or Consumer Spirituality? Cultivating Discipline Practices of Being Engaged by God," *Modern Theology*13/1 (1997): 3-28.

[23] Ibid., 4.

[24] LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us"; and Michael Downey, *Altogether Gift: A Trinitarian Spirituality* (Maryknoll:Orbis, 2000).

[25] LaCugna, *God for Us*, 402.

[26] Gabriel Moran, *Showing How: The Act of Teaching* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1997), 59-79.

[27] Ibid., 70.

[28] Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), 201.