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# Rahner's Axiom and the Hermeneutic Foundation of Thomas Weinandy's *Reconceiving the Trinity* Robert Shillaker

## RÉSUMÉ

L'axiome de Karl Rahner selon lequel la Trinité « économique » est la Trinité « immanente » et la Trinité « immanente » est la Trinité « économique » est repris par beaucoup, mais n'est compris que par peu de gens. Quoi qu'il en soit, c'est sur la base d'une application rigoureuse de cet axiome que Thomas Weinandy élabore une nouvelle conception de la Trinité selon laquelle « le Père engendre le Fils en ou par le Saint-Esprit ».

Le présent article vise à comprendre quelles sont

les implications de l'axiome et à apprécier la sûreté de toute construction théologique élaborée sur cette base à propos de la Trinité. L'auteur examine la relation entre la base biblique de la doctrine de la Trinité et la doctrine elle-même. Il conclut que l'usage de l'axiome rahnérien par Weinandy préserve l'affirmation de l'incompréhensibilité divine ou du mystère de l'être divin, mais qu'avec sa théorie, Weinandy court le risque d'être un peu trop confiant quant à sa capacité de sonder les relations intratrinaires.

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Karl Rahners Axiom, die „ökonomische“ Trinität sei auch die „immanente“ Trinität und die „immanente“ Trinität sei auch die „ökonomische“, wird in vieler Munde geführt, aber nur von wenigen verstanden. Nichtsdestotrotz entwickelt Thomas Weinandy ein neues Konzept der Trinität basierend auf einer sorgfältigen Anwendung dieses Axioms, dem zufolge „der Vater den Sohn zeugt in oder durch den Heiligen Geist“. Der vorliegende Artikel

trachtet danach, den Umfang dieses Axiom zu verstehen und somit die Zuverlässigkeit eines jeglichen Modells der Trinität, das durch seinen Gebrauch entsteht. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit wird der Beziehung zwischen der biblischen Basis der Trinitätslehre und dieser Lehre selbst gewidmet. Unsere Schlussfolgerung ist, dass Weinandys Anwendung von Rahners Axiom zwar Raum lässt für die Unfassbarkeit oder das Mysterium Gottes, dass aber Weinandys Theorie Gefahr läuft, sich zu sehr auf die Natur der innertrinitarischen Beziehungen festzulegen.

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## SUMMARY

Karl Rahner's axiom, that the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity, is used by many but understood by few. Nonetheless, Thomas Weinandy's new conception of the Trinity, in which 'the Father begets the Son in or by the Holy Spirit', is developed on the basis of a thorough application of this axiom.

The present article seeks to understand what the axiom entails and thus the security of any model of the Trinity developed through its use. Attention is paid to the relationship between the biblical basis of the doctrine of the Trinity and this doctrine itself. We conclude that Weinandy's use of Rahner's axiom leaves room for the incomprehensibility or mystery of God, but that Weinandy's theory runs the risk of being too confident about the nature of inter-Trinity relations.

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## 1. Introduction

Thomas Weinandy's *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* presents a fascinating development of the model of the Trinity.<sup>1</sup> His re-evaluation of the doctrine of the Trinity stems from his own experiences of the Charismatic Renewal and reflection on Romans 8:14-16.<sup>2</sup> His reflections conclude, using traditional theological terms, that 'The Father begets the Son in or by the Holy Spirit. The Son is begotten by the Father in the Spirit ...'<sup>3</sup> His model has several appealing features, namely an increased recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit and the resulting model which is more symmetrical. Weinandy's own hope is that it will present an opportunity to heal the rift over the *filioque* clause.<sup>4</sup> These are topics worthy of further exploration, but not in this article.<sup>5</sup> Instead I intend to explore the hermeneutic that Weinandy's thesis requires.

In developing his model of the Trinity, Weinandy looks at six biblical areas, namely, 'The Baptism of Jesus', 'The Cross', 'The Resurrection', 'Becoming Sons and Daughters in the Spirit', 'The Infancy Narratives' and 'Johannine Literature',<sup>6</sup> attempting to discern a pattern in the way the Trinity works.

Weinandy sees a 'trinitarian pattern woven within'<sup>7</sup> the historical account of the human conception of Jesus as explained in Luke 1:35. This 'decisive moment within the economy of salvation' gives 'testimony' to the inner life of the Trinity.

The depiction of the Father begetting his Son in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit becomes, I believe, a temporal icon of his eternally begetting the Son by the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

The descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and the blessing of Jesus by the Father are used in developing most trinitarian models, to prevent a modal understanding of the Godhead. Weinandy explores this incident by closely observing patterns. He notes the connection made in the Old Testament between God's creative word and the presence of the Spirit;<sup>9</sup> the Father's declaration of Jesus' sonship as dependent on him being the bearer of the Holy Spirit;<sup>10</sup> and the love of the Father towards the Son as demonstrated in the descent of the Spirit. These three features of the baptism of Jesus, for Weinandy, are indicative of the relationships between the three persons:

The breath/spirit by which God speaks his creative word at the dawn of creation and his prophetic word throughout history is the same

breath/Spirit by which he eternally breathes forth his Word/Son.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus' cry of 'Abba' in Gethsemane was spoken in the Spirit<sup>12</sup> and the glorification based on the mutual love between Father and Son in the cross indicated that 'within the drama of the cross is the eternal drama of the Father humbly giving all that is his to his Son in begetting or glorifying the Son in the Spirit.'<sup>13</sup> Similarly, interpreting the resurrection, Weinandy looks to the patterns behind the Father raising the Son in/by the Spirit, thus glorifying him.<sup>14</sup>

The resurrection ... becomes the supreme icon of the eternal trinitarian life ... so within the immanent Trinity the Father begets (eternally establishes and confirms) the Son in divine glory and power by the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. The hermeneutic axiom of Weinandy's thesis

Even from this cursory survey we can note that Weinandy rigorously applies a hermeneutic that assumes that all the details of the actions of the Trinity in the economy of salvation are entirely representative of, and thus revelatory concerning, the persons in their relationship with each other in eternity.<sup>16</sup> He is open about this from the start, quoting Karl Rahner's axiom: 'The immanent Trinity is identical to the economic Trinity'.<sup>17</sup> He writes:

It is inconceivable,<sup>18</sup> especially if we assume that the persons of the Trinity reveal themselves as they are in themselves and so act in accordance with their singular personalities (to do otherwise would not be revelation at all), thus acting *ad extra* as they act *ad intra*.<sup>19</sup>

Weinandy makes the assumption that God's external actions have to reflect, or perhaps better reveal, God, and that to deny this is to seriously undermine revelation.

This being the case, Weinandy believes that by being more thoroughgoing in his application of this hermeneutic he can reach a fresh view of the Trinity. Whereas, for example, the more reserved use by

Hans Urs von Balthasar<sup>20</sup> ... needs to posit this 'trinitarian inversion' precisely because he does not grasp that the Holy Spirit is active within the immanent Trinity in a manner similar to the manner in which he is active within the economic Trinity.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Evaluation of the axiom

#### 3.1 The motivation for the axiom

Rahner presents the axiom, '*The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity*',<sup>22</sup> with specific concerns in mind. With a degree of generalisation about the Western Christian, Rahner's assessment is that 'despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere "monotheists"'.<sup>23</sup> The belief in and development of the doctrine of the incarnation does not alleviate the situation as, to Rahner's mind,

One has the feeling that, for the catechism of head and heart (as contrasted with the printed catechism), the Christian's idea of the incarnation would not have to change at all if there were no Trinity.<sup>24</sup>

With this assumption being made by Western Christians it is

a more or less foregone conclusion that each of the divine persons (if God freely so decided) could have become man, so that the incarnation of precisely this person can tell us nothing about the peculiar features of *this* person within the divinity.<sup>25</sup>

This symptom provokes the development of the axiom, for if any person of the Trinity could have been incarnate: 1) It implies that there is nothing unique about the immanent Son-Father relationship that made the historical event of the incarnation of the Son, in particular, appropriate. 2) What we can know of the Trinity we are *told*, by implication, not *shown*. So the immanent Trinity can be derived only from direct statements, and not from economic actions. 3) The terms 'Father' and 'Son', e.g., are not related to the economic action.<sup>26</sup> This appears to make them a useless analogy: in what way is the Second Person the 'Son', if he could equally have sent the Father to become an incarnate baby? If the term 'Son' merely means that he became incarnate then it is a truism about the economic action.

This concerns Rahner because it presupposes that a trinitarian 'hypostasis' is a 'univocal concept'; this is false as the persons are distinguishable.<sup>27</sup> The incarnation is to be understood as more than a handy vehicle for the divine being in the economy of salvation, but rather as intrinsic to the Son (as Son, in contrast to Father). The impact on the reading of revelation is significant: do we see

in Jesus the Son in particular, or do we see God (it could be any of the hypostases) clothed in human nature?

#### 3.2 The hermeneutic of the axiom

What Rahner's axiom actually proposes is not universally agreed upon. Vincent Battaglia asks,

Is he claiming that the economic Trinity helps us to know about the immanent Trinity (an epistemological principle) or is he saying that there is a strict identity between them (an ontological statement)? It would appear that interpreters of Rahner have taken up both options. ... The distinction between epistemological and ontological interpretations is important because it has a direct bearing on the kinds of conclusions we can draw about God's own life from a consideration of our salvific experience of God.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas Battaglia suggests two ways of reading the axiom, Dennis Jowers has a more elaborate analysis of the readings which extend to five possible approaches: 1) trivially obvious identity, 2) absolute identity, 3) copy theory, 4) merely *de facto* identity, of which only one option carries the title, 5) 'Rahner's actual meaning'.<sup>29</sup> This meaning Jowers summarises as, 'the immanent constitution of the Trinity forms a kind of *a priori* law for the divine self-communication *ad extra* such that the structure of the latter cannot but correspond to the structure of the former'.<sup>30</sup>

Randal Rauser has a different taxonomy: his first potential reading, which he calls the 'strict realist reading'<sup>31</sup> of the axiom, aligns with Jowers',<sup>32</sup> and is immediately dismissed as an obviously wrong reading.<sup>33</sup> Rahner cannot mean something as obvious and uncontested as that there are not six divine persons in two trinities! The other strict realist reading of the axiom does not lead to a trivial reading but, Rauser argues, to a contradiction:

To interpret Rahner in the strict (and interesting) sense would thus amount to saying that the set of properties God exemplifies apart from creation (immanently) is identical to the set of properties God exemplifies with creation (economically).<sup>34</sup>

But some of the properties that God exemplifies economically are not essential properties but contingent ones, for example creator, redeemer or sanctifier; whereas the properties that God exemplifies immanently are essential. The only way to defend this reading of the axiom would be to claim that the economic properties are essential

properties, like the other properties of the immanent Trinity. This, obviously, leads to conclusions wholly unacceptable to the wider doctrines of Christianity: if God is essentially Creator and Redeemer, it makes God's existence related to, and dependent on, the world.<sup>35</sup>

The first two of Jowers' categories might be identified loosely as tending to ontological identity between the economic and immanent. The 'copy theory' goes too far in the other direction: the Trinity in the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity, not merely a copy or 'manifestation', as 'a picture corresponds to the reality it portrays'.<sup>36</sup> Rahner, alert to the danger of being 'mere "monotheists"',<sup>37</sup> would not be satisfied by this artificial correspondence.

Rather than the more simplistic alternative of ontological or hermeneutic readings, Jowers' insights reveal a progressive scale from one end of the possible interpretations to the other. At the heart of Rahner's proposal is the idea that it is specifically God-the-Son who comes to us in the economy, and so there is a true revelation of the triunity of the Godhead in the events of salvation. In that sense there is indeed an ontological identity, but Rahner's emphasis and purpose are to demonstrate the exemplary *revelation* provided through the economy.

### 3.3 Immanent-economic collapse: LaCugna and Weinandy

In his criticism of the ontological interpretation of the axiom, Battaglia identifies the danger of collapsing the economic and immanent Trinities into one.<sup>38</sup> We should note that Weinandy does not want to venture along this road, and he has a substantial appendix dealing with the theology of Catherine LaCugna. Although LaCugna is appreciative of Rahner's work,<sup>39</sup> she proposes an alternative to the economic-immanent Trinity interpretation.<sup>40</sup> She wants to abandon the use of the terms economic and immanent Trinity altogether, and to redefine the terms *oikonomia* and *theologia* in a different way: '*Oikonomia* is not the Trinity *ad extra* but the comprehensive plan of God... similarly, *theologia* is not the Trinity *in se*, but, much more modestly and simply, the mystery of God.'<sup>41</sup>

Taking a similar starting point to Rahner, she notes the epistemological implication: 'Since our only point of access to *theologia* is through the *oikonomia*, then an "immanent" trinitarian theology of God is nothing more than a theology of the

*economy of salvation*.'<sup>42</sup> So it follows that 'A theology of the immanent Trinity does not refer to "God as such apart from relationship to us" but to "God revealed in Christ and the Spirit".'<sup>43</sup>

On the surface there seems to be a similarity with Weinandy. What we see in the economy is the 'immanent' Trinity (though LaCugna wants to remove the whole idea of immanent and economic trinities, as the Trinity *in se* and *ad extra*). The result is a practical unity, which would allow us to say that we know God in the economy while still acknowledging a mystery beyond the revelation we do see. But LaCugna severely limits the knowledge of the Trinity beyond the economy:

Theories about what God is apart from God's self-communication in salvation history remain unverifiable and ultimately untheological, since *theologia* is given only through *oikonomia*.<sup>44</sup>

Weinandy argues that this use of the axiom by LaCugna collapses the Trinity into the *oikonomia* and creates an unbridgeable gap to God in his inner life: we can only know the phenomenal God and not the noumenal God who actually exists distinct from creation:<sup>45</sup>

While there is no ontological distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity – the Trinity which expresses itself in the economy must be one and the same Trinity that exists in itself – yet there is an ontological distinction between God and all else that exists. The *oikonomia* is the realm where God, in all his wholly otherness as God – ontologically distinct from the *oikonomia* – is present and acts...<sup>46</sup>

Weinandy argues that, despite LaCugna's use of personal and relational language with respect to God, she effectively makes God outside the *oikonomia* almost a philosophical principle, with no real triune subjects in a personal relationship.<sup>47</sup>

Battaglia expresses concern about the two extremes:

Whilst it is incorrect to say that there are 'two trinities', it is equally incorrect to state that there is no 'gap' between the economic and immanent Trinity, that somehow the divine economy reveals all and contains all that is the perichoretic divine life. ... Hence, the 'vice versa' (*umgekehrt*) aspect of the Grundaxiom is problematic.<sup>48</sup>

So is the 'vice-versa' the problem? That is, it cannot be said that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, as Battaglia argues: 'the defini-



tion of hypostasis or person is based on relations of origin, not divine missions'.<sup>49</sup> This would appear to be Yves Congar's first word of caution too:

The first half of this statement by Rahner is beyond dispute, but the second half has to be clarified... even if God's creatures did not exist, God would be still a Trinity.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity in the sense that it is the immanent Trinity revealed in action.

### 3.4 *Opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*

A more sustained challenge to Weinandy's use of Rahner's axiom comes from the longer established principle *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*.<sup>51</sup> This forms the central argument to Dennis Jowers' eventual conclusion that the axiom is invalid (in part, but conclusively). The *ad extra* principle, Jowers establishes on the basis of 'divine simplicity, the transitivity of identity,<sup>52</sup> the eternal generation of the Son, and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>53</sup>

This axiom, at least as ordinarily understood, implies: a) that the divine persons possess, as peculiar to themselves, only their reference to each other and the properties that follow immediately therefrom; b) that they can act, accordingly, only through God's essential omnipotence, which is equally identical with each of the three; c) that all divine acts *ad extra* may, consequently, be ascribed with equal right to any of the divine persons; and d) that one may not, therefore, legitimately infer the tri-personality of God from a salvation history that may appear to manifest the activity of three divine agencies.<sup>54</sup>

Henri Blocher quotes, with emphasis, the full principle: '*opera ad extra [indivisa sunt] servato DISCRIMINE ET ORDINE PERSONARUM* – the distinction and order of the persons being preserved.'<sup>55</sup> This Jowers appears to include in his second essential starting point: 'In God all things are one, *where no opposition of relation intervenes*'.<sup>56</sup> However, Jowers' phraseology gives a more restricted caveat to the *ad extra*: that is, it restricts the acceptable limitation of the *ad extra* to relational '*oppositions*',<sup>57</sup> and thus does not allow 'distinctions' in economic roles, which are not oppositions but appropriations. He concludes from this that:

If this [*ad extra*] axiom is correct, then the

divine acts *ad extra* are utterly and completely undifferentiated, and an economic Trinity, i.e., a manifestation of the intra-Trinitarian distinctions through the acts of salvation history, exists only to the extent that God appropriates<sup>58</sup> divine acts to particular divine persons in Scripture. The axiom in question implies, that is to say, that no economic Trinity whatsoever would exist without verbal revelation and that the economic Trinity as Rahner understands it, i.e., a threefold pattern in the divine acts themselves, does not and cannot exist.<sup>59</sup>

Even if it is accepted that the features of the economy are appropriations, and not immediate manifestations of the trinitarian persons, the questions has to be asked, why Scripture appropriates a particular action for a particular person? Possible answers seem to be that it was arbitrary, or retrospectively because of the role and in effect a truism, or more satisfactorily, that there was some reason within the immanent Trinity. In this 'mere appropriation',<sup>60</sup> there should be some correlation between the divine person and the appropriation of an action. If it is not true that the economic actions are on the basis of and reveal the immanent Trinity, then this appropriation is completely arbitrary, or perhaps even misleading.<sup>61</sup>

Once Jowers has established the validity of the *ad extra* idea he argues that,

Since the Bible reveals God's absolute simplicity and the transitivity of identity no less than it reveals the real diversity of the Trinitarian persons, one may reasonably suppose that whatever diversifies the divine persons from one another does so in such a way as not to compromise the doctrines of divine simplicity and the transitivity of identity.<sup>62</sup>

This could be expressed the other way too: the doctrines of divine simplicity and transitivity of identity should be held in a way that does not compromise the real diversity of the three divine persons (as revealed in the economic actions that they have appropriated). While Jowers has shown that there is a *prima facie* case that the two axioms are incompatible he is less convincing in establishing why the *ad extra* axiom (encapsulating simplicity and the transitivity of identity) should hold the hermeneutic veto.<sup>63</sup>

### 3.5 A *via media*: 'Apophatic Trinitarianism' and the application of Rahner's axiom

Are we too absolute or mechanical: does it have

to be either/or? It does if you take a strong reading of each axiom; but as hermeneutical principles both axioms could be held to maintain the unity and triunity of the Godhead.

Both axioms have a use protecting against the Scylla of modalism and the Charybdis of tritheistic leanings, but they are both philosophically derived models, and beyond biblical language or the ecumenical creeds. If applied absolutely, each appears to deny an aspect of the biblical testimony.<sup>64</sup> If the use of the *opera ad extra* leads to a failure to distinguish adequately the persons of the Trinity in revelation and the reality of the incarnation as revealing the Son; or if a particular use of Rahner's axiom leads to an ontological identity in all aspects and a conflation of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity; then we have to say that the axioms as models should submit to the mystery of the biblical narrative, and not insist on rationalistically reaching a neat conclusion.<sup>65</sup>

This hesitant, or non-absolute, acceptance of both axioms as worthy attempts to protect against erroneous teaching in opposite extremes also reflects the need to accept that at the heart of the matter is a mystery, and that overconfident assertions about the inner life of the Trinity should be eschewed, regardless whether they are positive or negative about what we can know. Karen Kilby states her discomfort with the nature of some trinitarian thinking in this area:

It is possible to ask whether there are not certain dangers associated with the robust trinitarianism of our time. ... it is arguably not simply a return to the tradition, but rather a distinctive reshaping of it, and there is the question whether in some instances this reshaping ought to be deemed a distortion.<sup>66</sup>

Kilby uses the analogy of mathematics, where one starts with the natural numbers, then moves to fractions and then through many stages to higher levels of abstraction. Once mathematicians are comfortable at one level of abstraction they do not need to keep referring back to earlier and simpler levels.

In theology there can also take place a process of abstraction – to describe God as three persons and one substance, for instance, must surely be counted as sitting at a level of abstraction higher than describing God as Father, Son and Spirit, which in turn may well be a rather abstract formulation in relation to the gospels, epistles and so on. But in theology, unlike in

mathematics, if one follows the approach I am suggesting, one can never kick away the ladder. One cannot understand the higher level of abstraction in any other way than always in relation to what it is abstracted from – and indeed it has no purpose, no interest, except in relation to what it was first abstracted from.<sup>67</sup>

So it follows that

[T]he doctrine of the Trinity had its origins in the need to ensure the right reading of Scripture, the right kind of thinking about Christ in relation to the Father (and even more to rule out certain wrong versions of each) and my proposal is that it is useful and meaningful only in so far as it retains its connections to these origins.<sup>68</sup>

This is all well and good if it requires that theologians continually interrogate their theses with the Bible. It does, however, beg the question of the 'right reading of Scripture'. Do we end up with a rather close circular argument: the doctrine of the Trinity was to ensure the right reading of Scripture and it, in turn, is derived from the right reading of Scripture?

Nevertheless, the point is well made that the further we abstract our theology from the security (though lack of detailed clarity) of Scripture, the greater the potential for distortion. Another mathematical analogy might help here: following an empirical experiment the data is presented with its estimated errors ( $\pm$ ); every subsequent mathematical operation using this data (i.e. increasing levels of abstraction in the analogy) increases the error estimate. The biblical data does not have the detail or theological sophistication of later models, and with every step of our theological development the potential for error increases. As Kilby argues,

So to accept the doctrine of the Trinity is to hold a range of beliefs about the immanent Trinity, about how God really is, but it is not therefore to have any insight into the immanent Trinity. We know we must say each of these things about God, but we do not know how to understand them, and most particularly we do not know how to understand them all together. We cannot integrate them and derive a unified picture, a grasp, a 'concept', a vision, or a wholistic [sic] trinitarian *understanding* of God.<sup>69</sup>

This approach seeks to be modest in its affirmations, and the concept of levels of abstraction can

be a helpful way to understand what is occurring. But we note that even in this apophatic trinitarianism abstraction still has to occur: Kilby is still able to write, 'the threeness we meet in the economy' and oneness of God is not illusory, and the economic Trinity cannot be collapsed into the immanent Trinity. We are still left, then, with the question as to what is the acceptable level of abstraction.

In her survey of the Cappadocians' apophatic approach to the Trinity, Kilby notes the reserve of Gregory of Nazianzus:

One might protest that between the apophaticism of the beginning and the caution of the end we have Gregory's substantive discussion of the Son and Spirit in relation to the Father. And what do we learn here? ... 'How was he begotten? – I repeat the question in indignation. The begetting of God must be honored by silence. It is a great thing for you to learn that he was begotten. But the manner of his generation we will not admit that even angels can conceive, much less you. Shall I tell you how it was? It was in a manner known to the Father who begot, and to the Son who was begotten. Anything more than this is hidden by a cloud, and escapes your dim sight.'<sup>70</sup>

This is a move from 'Father' and 'Son' in the narrative, to 'begotten' and 'unbegotten' in the abstract, but there Gregory demands a halt. Weinandy's thesis seems, initially, to defy this very prohibition: to explain how the Son was begotten.

For Kilby, Augustine's problem was that once one has arrived at the doctrine of the Trinity, at the end of a long struggle, one can then safely use it as the *starting point* for a new investigation, and this is precisely what I am suggesting must be resisted.<sup>71</sup>

Is this what Rahner's axiom, in the hands of Weinandy, does? Does his self-conscious attempt to navigate through the *filioque* debate immediately drag the discussion into higher abstractions? Or is it a simple act of interpreting the biblical narrative?

Weinandy's use of Rahner's axiom as a hermeneutical *guide* is not at the higher levels of abstraction and leaves room for the incomprehensibility or mystery of God. Rauser describes this use of the axiom as the 'loose realist reading'. However, he sees it as an arbitrary attempt to make the literal reading work which, on the other hand, fails on the charge of triviality again.<sup>72</sup> It is, Rauser argues,

an 'obtuse restatement of a Christian dogma which provides no new insight into it at all'.<sup>73</sup>

This is where Weinandy would, I suggest, disagree fundamentally. For Rauser this use of the axiom is self-evident and trivial, yet for Weinandy it provokes the hermeneutic discussion about the method, or extent, of biblical revelation: if it is the triune God acting in creation then his actions leave an image of the triunity,<sup>74</sup> especially when we are told that the Son, specifically, was incarnate. As T. F. Torrance notes, the economic activity of each person, while impossible to determine absolutely, reflects something of their eternal personal properties.<sup>75</sup> If it is really God the Son in the incarnation, surely this reveals something of him with respect to God the Father rather than simply reveal an undifferentiated divine essence. But it does not necessitate, or even suggest, that we know everything.

As Yves Congar's second caution about the axiom warns, it should not imply a full communication of the Trinity; there is always a limit to revelation. Interestingly, for us, Congar chooses the example of the Spirit's work in the mission of Christ: 'If all the data of the incarnation were transposed into the eternity of the Logos, it would be necessary to say that the Son proceeds from the Father and the Holy Spirit – *a Patre Spiritoque*':<sup>76</sup> Weinandy's very point!

#### 4. *Filioque*

With his proposal Weinandy self-consciously speaks to the *filioque* discussion. Central to the arguments between the Eastern and Western views is the interpretation of the actions of the Father, Son and Spirit in the Johannine accounts. As we noted, many have criticised Rahner's axiom as entailing the logical necessity of an *a Patre Spiritoque* clause which, for them, demonstrates its implausibility.<sup>77</sup> This has indeed been a stock argument against the *filioque* clause since Photius.<sup>78</sup> Putting it anachronistically, Photius seems to employ Rahner's axiom, or something like it. This is common to both sides of the debate.

For the supporters of *filioque* the connection between the economic and the immanent is attractive. As Avery Dulles writes,

A further asset of the *filioque* is the harmony it establishes between the inner constitution of the Trinity and the missions by which the Son and the Holy Spirit accomplish their saving work in history.<sup>79</sup>



If the *filioque* and the accompanying theology are necessitated by John 15:26 (and the economic action of the Son sending the Spirit), then it seems inconsistent to disallow the evidence of the Spirit's economic action in the incarnation and mission of the Son. This was the logically consistent approach of Photius, in his ridicule of the *filioque*, and also of those who dismiss Rahner's axiom and conclude that it points (problematically) to an equivalent *spiritoque* clause.<sup>80</sup> Weinandy agrees that it points this way, but he holds that rather than this being a defeater of the *filioque*, or a reason to dismiss (one interpretation of) Rahner's axiom, it leads to a more complete and symmetrical model of the Trinity.

If we prefer a strongly apophatic answer, pointing to the incomprehensible mystery of God, it seems implausible that any axiom, Rahner's or the *opera ad extra*, can be acceptable. The alternative to this sceptical approach is to attempt to discern the elements of truth in both formulations, each of which tries in its own way to protect the truth of the paradox: to find what Stanley Grenz called the 'golden thread'.<sup>81</sup>

Weinandy, in his *Reconceiving the Trinity*, applies Rahner's axiom in a robust manner, but as a hermeneutic tool, not as an ontological statement. Thus his conclusions do not result in the implied denial that the *opera ad extra Trinitatis indivisa sunt*. The greatest danger that Weinandy's theory faces is the issue highlighted by Kilby, namely being too confident in developing a theory of the nature of inter-Trinity relations. Weinandy, however, by interacting directly with the text of the Bible, i.e. the source of our Trinitarian knowledge, objects to any accusation that his model of the Trinity is built upon ever higher levels of abstraction. The methodology does, however, run the risk of incorporating every detail, including accidental historical elements of the narrative, into his model of the Trinity. It will take a more detailed text-by-text exegesis, beyond the scope of this article, to evaluate fully. Nevertheless, Weinandy's thesis applies a logically consistent hermeneutic and the result is therefore worthy of further consideration.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Thomas Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995 and Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011).
- 2 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, ix-x.
- 3 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 17. For such an apparently novel development in the doctrine of the Trinity, Weinandy's work has not provoked a serious response, apart from book reviews; there has been no analysis of the strength of the thesis and its implications; indeed, it went out of print until Wipf & Stock reprinted it. See Jeffrey Silcock, *Lutheran Theological Journal* 30.3 (1996) 158-159; David Scott, *Pro Ecclesia* 6. 2 (1997) 250-251; Gavin D'Costa, *Theology* 101.802 (1998) 288-289; Thomas Smail, *Anvil* 13.3 (1996) 280-281; Kerry Robichaux, *Affirmation & Critique* 1 (1996) 56-58; Klaus Nürnberger, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 96 (1996) 96-98; Thomas Thompson, *Calvin Theological Journal* 32.1 (1997) 195-200; Earle Ellis, *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 40.3 (1998) 106-107; Joseph Bracken, *Theological Studies* 57.2 (1996) 384; Lewis Ayres, *Journal of Theological Studies* 50.1 (1999) 430-432; Francesca Murphy, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54.2 (2001) 259-260; Steffen Lösel, *Anglican Theological Review* 78.3 (1996) 516-518. Brian Daley has a paragraph of discussion in 'Revisiting the "Filioque": Part Two: Contemporary Catholic Approaches', *Pro Ecclesia* (2001) 205, and David Coffey an extended endnote in *Deus Trinitas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 163-164.
- 4 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, xi. See also Thomas Weinandy, Paul McPartlan and Stratford Caldecott, 'Clarifying the *filioque*: The Catholic-Orthodox dialogue', *Communio* 23.2 (1996) 354-373. On pages 365-367 Weinandy lists six advantages that his model brings to the *filioque* debate.
- 5 I hope to address Weinandy's model of the Trinity in a future article.
- 6 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 25, 29, 31, 33, 43 respectively. On page 25 he explains the order in which he treats these: 'In examining the New Testament evidence ... I will ... first examine the early Christian *kerygma* concerning Jesus' baptism, death and resurrection as well as the effects of his redemptive work. ... Then ... I will study the Infancy Narratives and the Johannine works since there are considered by most contemporary scripture scholars to be of later development.'
- 7 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 42.
- 8 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 41-42, cf. 27.
- 9 In Genesis there is the *ruach* hovering over the water. There is the repeated association of Word and Spirit, e.g. Ps 33:6 and 104:30; Gen 2:7; Job 33:4 and 34:14-15. The proclamations by the prophets were due to the Spirit's presence; Weinandy,

- Father's Spirit*, 26-27, particularly draws attention to Ezekiel 37.
- 10 Mt 3:17 read in connection with Isa 41:4 and 44:2-3. Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 27.
- 11 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 27.
- 12 See Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15; Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 29. He also refers to Heb 9:14; Weinandy, *Father's Spirit of Sonship*, 30 n.11.
- 13 Jn 17:1, 5 and 24. Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 30-31.
- 14 Rom 1:4, 8:11; Acts 2:36; Phil 2:9-11 and fulfilling the promises of Ps 16:8-11 and 110:1.
- 15 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 32.
- 16 Weinandy applies this hermeneutic not only to passages that refer to the personal interactions in the economy but also to economic actions in salvation; see his sections 'Becoming Sons and Daughters in the Spirit' and 'The Johannine Literature'. Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 33-38 and 43-50.
- 17 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 22. 'Immanent' in this context means the Trinity as transcendent, almost the opposite to the term's use in contrast of transcendent and immanent in discussions on God's relationship to creation. Sometimes in theology the alternative 'ontological Trinity' is used. The 'economic Trinity' refers to the Trinity in salvation history. Fred Sanders notes the case for using 'revealed Trinity' in its place. Fred Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005) 4.
- 18 In response to the repeated use of this word by the Sicilian in *The Princess Bride*, Inigo responds: 'You keep using that word! ... I don't think it means what you think it does'; we have a similar problem here, after all many theologians are able to conceive it otherwise. William Goldman, *The Princess Bride* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999) 102. Indeed the primary argument that McPartlan raises is the uncritical use of the axiom. Weinandy, McPartlan and Caldecott, 'Clarifying the *filioque*', 368.
- 19 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 36.
- 20 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* Vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992) 186.
- 21 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 42-43 n.8. For a recent discussion of von Balthasar see Matthew Sutton, 'A Compelling Trinitarian Taxonomy: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of the Trinitarian Inversion and Reversion', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14.2 (2012) 161-176. Although David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas*, 164, criticises Weinandy's thesis as too radical, he notes (and retains) two distinct trinitarian models in the Bible, which he calls the procession model and return model.
- 22 Karl Rahner, *Trinity* (London: Burns & Oates, 1970) 22. Sanders, *Image*, 58-59, raises the intriguing point that Rahner thought he was stating an earlier theory from an unidentified source.
- 23 Rahner, *Trinity*, 10.
- 24 Rahner, *Trinity*, 11.
- 25 Rahner, *Trinity*, 11.
- 26 Rahner, *Trinity*, 28.
- 27 Rahner, *Trinity*, 29. In a footnote Rahner dismisses the argument from divine perfection, i.e. if the Father could not become incarnate it implies imperfection. It was a perfection for the Son *as Son* to be incarnate; it does not follow that it should necessarily be a perfection of the Father.
- 28 Vincent Battaglia, 'An Examination of Karl Rahner's Trinitarian Theology', *Australian eJournal of Theology* (2007) at [http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt\\_9/battaglia.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_9/battaglia.htm) [accessed 25 Oct 2010]. Though not quite the same Sanders, *Image*, 6-7, divides the interpreters of the axiom into two camps: Radicalisers and Restrictors. His work provides a very useful analysis of these different approaches.
- 29 Dennis Jowers, 'An Exposition and Critique of Karl Rahner's Axiom: "The Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity and Vice Versa"', *Mid-American Journal of Theology* 15 (2004) 165-200, 166-168.
- 30 Jowers, 'Exposition', 168.
- 31 As opposed to a 'loose realist reading' or thirdly a 'strict anti-realist reading'.
- 32 What Jowers, 'Exposition', 166, calls the 'trivially obvious identity'.
- 33 Randal Rauser, 'Rahner's Rule: An Emperor without Clothes?', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7.1 (2005) 81-94, 83.
- 34 Rauser, 'Rahner's Rule', 84.
- 35 Rauser, 'Rahner's Rule', 84. Jowers, 'Exposition', 167 also dismisses this 'absolute identity' of the immanent and economic Trinity as not Rahner's intention.
- 36 Jowers, 'Exposition', 168.
- 37 Rahner, *Trinity*, 10.
- 38 Battaglia, 'Examination of Karl Rahner', 11 n. 47: 'Amongst those whom many see as collapsing the ontological distinction are Piet Schoonenberg, LaCugna and Moltmann: see LaCugna's introduction to *The Trinity*, xiv-xv and *God for Us*, 6, 212, 222-224, 231; Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 160.'
- 39 Catherine M. LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) writes: 'His theology as a whole is a profound meditation on the essential unity of "theology" and economy, premised on the idea that God is by nature self-communicating.'
- 40 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 223.
- 41 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 223.
- 42 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 224 [her italics].
- 43 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 227.
- 44 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 231.
- 45 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 131. Weinandy's argument with LaCugna demonstrates that he is not

what Sanders calls a Radicalizer of the axiom, but a Restrictor.

- 46 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 130.
- 47 Weinandy, *Father's Spirit*, 132-133.
- 48 Battaglia, 'Examination of Karl Rahner'. Sanders, *Image*, e.g. 8 and 173, expresses the problem in similar terms.
- 49 Battaglia, 'Examination of Karl Rahner'.
- 50 Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit, Volume III, The River of the Water of Life (Rev 22:1) Flows in the East and in the West* (New York: Crossroads, 2006) 13; noted by LaCugna, *God For Us*, 219-220.
- 51 Sanders, *Image*, 60.
- 52 'i.e., the principle that if a=b and b=c, then a=c, seems similarly compelling. Christ himself seems to employ this principle, for instance, in Matt 25:34-40' and 'the Bible employs the law of the transitivity of identity in reasoning about God [i]n Rev. 4:11'. Jowers, 'Exposition', 178 and 187.
- 53 Jowers, 'Exposition', 176.
- 54 Jowers, 'Exposition', 175.
- 55 Henri Blocher, 'Immanence and Transcendence in Trinitarian Theology' in Kevin Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 120, citing the French version of Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics Vol 1* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 234 [German: *Dogmatik I: Die christliche Lehre von Gott*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1946], who in turn cites Augustine, *De Trinitate*, I, 4.
- 56 Jowers, 'Exposition', 175-176, citing Heinrich Denzinger & Peter Hünermann (eds), *Enchiridion Symbolorum* 1330; italics mine.
- 57 Which limits any reading of the economic Trinity to relations of origins. Sanders, *Image*, 177.
- 58 "'Appropriation" is a technical term for the ascription of essential, divine attributes or works to an individual divine person in order to manifest that person's distinctive properties.' [Jowers' note.]
- 59 Jowers, 'Exposition', 175-176.
- 60 Drayton C. Benner, 'Augustine and Karl Rahner on the Relationship between the Immanent Trinity and the Economic Trinity', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9.1 (2007) 24-38, 31; Rahner, *Trinity*, 23-24.
- 61 Sanders, *Image*, 65, notes that Rahner 'goes further by arguing that it is not merely *fitting* for the economic Logos to be the immanent Logos; it is in some sense *necessary*.'
- 62 Jowers, 'Exposition', 182.
- 63 Jowers, 'Exposition', 190-195, attempts to show philosophically that it is possible to have a specific action of the Son (namely, taking on human nature in the incarnation) while still upholding the *opera ad extra* principle. This argument is beyond the scope of the present article, but Jowers, 195, concludes more cautiously: 'One can reasonably believe, although one cannot demonstrate, that

the doctrines of the Incarnation and the inseparability of all divine acts *ad extra* do not necessarily conflict.' Perhaps the *opera ad extra* rule is not the absolute axiom that provides an overruling hermeneutic.

Another reason that Jowers, 'Exposition, 173-175, disputes the axiom is that it implies a denial or denigration of verbal revelation. Fred Sanders seems to think it is a 'simple enough, and quite obvious' feature now that Jowers has pointed it out; see Fred Sanders, Review of Dennis Jowers, *Karl Rahner's Trinitarian Axiom: 'The Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity and Vice Versa'* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2006), *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008) 370-372.

However, we are equally dependent upon verbal revelation in Scripture both for direct statements concerning the interpersonal relationships within the Trinity and for the details of economic relations. Irrespective of whether one thinks Rahner is trying to deny verbal revelation, that is certainly not the aim of Weinandy. There is a clear difference between Jowers' reading of Rahner and Weinandy's practical use of the axiom: on the one hand is the use of the axiom to present a doctrine of the immanent Trinity on the (epistemological) basis of economic actions, on the other hand is Weinandy's use of the axiom as a hermeneutical tool to interpret the economic events *verbally revealed* in Scripture.

- 64 This is LaCugna's concern: 'By the medieval period in both Byzantine and Latin theology, the divine persons were thought of as existing "in" God, in a realm cut off from the economy of salvation history by virtue of an unbreachable ontological difference. In scholastic theology, the doctrine of the Trinity was identified as the science of God's inner relatedness. The result of this was a one-sided theology of God that had little to do with the economy of Christ and the Spirit, with the themes of Incarnation and grace, and therefore little to do with the Christian life. Greek medieval theology took refuge in an exaggerated agnosticism that relegated the trinitarian persons to a region far beyond our capacity to experience or understand. Hence the defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity.' *God For Us*, 210.
- 65 Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1984) 277, maintains this balance as he consciously works from the economic actions to the immanent Trinity: 'However, if we follow the order of knowledge, then we must begin with the missions as these occur in the history of salvation and with the revelation of this in words, and then come to know the eternal processions via the missions as their ground and presupposition.' However, on page 280 he quickly enters discussions about the immanent Trinity based on oppositions: '*In Deo omnia sunt unum, ubi non obviat relativis oppositio* (In God everything is one where there is no opposi-

- tion of relationship).’
- 66 Karen Kilby ‘Is Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010) 66. She adds a note: ‘One might object that robust trinitarianism is not new at all: Athanasius, for instance, was surely nothing if not robust. But fighting on one side in an ecclesial dispute, at a point when the “orthodox” position is not yet determined, is in fact a rather different thing from forcefully championing the importance of a doctrine which is not in fact in dispute within the tradition. However robust and however trinitarian Athanasius may have been, he was not in fact doing the same thing as contemporary robust trinitarians.’
- 67 Kilby, ‘Apophatic Trinitarianism’, 69.
- 68 Kilby, ‘Apophatic Trinitarianism’, 70.
- 69 Kilby, ‘Apophatic Trinitarianism’, 71.
- 70 Kilby, ‘Apophatic Trinitarianism’, 73, quoting Gregory of Nazianzus, ‘Third Theological Oration’, in Edward Hardy (ed.), *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) 165.
- 71 Kilby, ‘Apophatic Trinitarianism’, 75.
- 72 Rauser, ‘Rahner’s Rule’, 86, 87.
- 73 Rauser, ‘Rahner’s Rule’, 87.
- 74 The superficial similarity with Sanders’ title is coincidental as I wrote this expression before coming across his work. Sanders, *Image*, 166-188, explores the nature of ‘image’ in this context in some depth.
- 75 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001) 198-199.
- 76 Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, III, 16.
- 77 Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, III, 16; Nick Needham, ‘Filioque: East or West?’, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 15 (1997) 142-162, 157; Photius, *The Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1987) S3, 60 and S9, 63; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 186 (as noted by Weinandy, above); LaCugna, *God For Us*, 220.
- 78 Photius, *Mystagogy*, S3, 60, see also S4, 61; S9, 63.
- 79 Avery Dulles, ‘The *Filioque*: What Is at Stake?’, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 59 (1995) 31-48, 37-38, available at [www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/dullesthefilioque.pdf](http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/dullesthefilioque.pdf) [accessed 17 Aug 2011].
- 80 It remains a problem to Sanders, *Image*, 168, too: ‘Evenhanded theological interpretation of all the economic occurrences would soon generate multiple doctrines: a *spirituque* formula at the incarnation, a *filioque* at Pentecost, and a strange near-collapse of the persons into each other in the eschaton, when the Son returns the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor 15). Alternatively, theologians constructing the doctrine of the Trinity from scriptural witness would need to identify a kind of Trinitarian canon within the canon, pledging loyalty to one of the witnessed orderings and explaining the others on its basis.’ What Weinandy does is to widen this canon to include the texts that support the ‘*spirituque* formulation’. Somewhat tentatively, the ‘strange near-collapse of the persons’ may perhaps be the beginning of a ‘perichoretic formulation’.
- 81 The golden thread is the answer to ‘the question as to how theology conceptualizes the relationship between God-in-eternity and God-in-salvation in a manner that takes seriously the importance of the latter to the former and avoids collapsing the former into the latter and compromising the freedom of the eternal God’. Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 222.