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Missio Dei: The Trinity and Christian Missions

Kevin Daugherty

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THE DOCTRINE OF the Trinity has traditionally been understood as the quintessentially *Christian* doctrine of God. The difficulty of explaining it, however, has sometimes made it problematic for missions. Monotheistic faiths in particular tend to take it as some form of tritheism. One proposed solution has been simply to dispense with the doctrine as a relic of medieval Christianity. This proposal is especially popular among the champions of interreligious dialogue.[1] On the other hand, even some advocates of religious pluralism have tried to salvage the Trinity through a reinterpretation of its meaning. The Trinity has even been proposed as a sort of ground for unity among the religions.[2] On the other hand, when evangelical missiologists defend the importance of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity for missions, the focus is often on the individual roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[3] While this is certainly legitimate, it falls short of a treatment of the Trinity as such.

1 E.g., John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 124.

2 Reference is often made to the following: Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973); Raimundo Panikkar, 'The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges' in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987), pp. 89-116.

3 E.g., G. William Schweer, 'The Missionary Mandate of God's Nature' in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), pp. 97-113.

Dr Kevin Daugherty *is Missionary in Residence at Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee and previously served on the faculty of Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary, Baguio City, The Philippines. He earned his PhD in Theology from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, USA and continues his interest in recent and postmodern theology and contextualization. This paper was originally delivered as 'Trinity and Missions' at* Theology in Context: An International Symposium*, The Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary, December 20, 2004.*

This paper will adumbrate a trinitarian theology that highlights implications of God's trinitarian nature for missions. This will involve two primary arguments. First, some contemporary trinitarian thinking suggests that the trinitarian being of God is his own being-on-mission. In classical terms, this is an *economic* Trinity: through his trinitarian nature, God has acted in order to establish relationships beyond himself (*ad extra*). But the proposal below also attempts to describe the being of God as he is 'in himself' (*ad intra*)—an *immanent* Trinity. In fact, this approach may obviate the distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity.

The second argument will build upon the theological foundation of God's trinitarian nature. God's being-on-mission has implications for the *practice* of Christian missions. With respect to the suggestions of an inter-religious Trinity, the proposal will reaffirm the belief that the Trinity is distinctively *Christian*. On the other hand, the exigencies of the Christian mission do call for a rethinking of *how* the trinitarian God is proclaimed. If the explanation of the Trinity in terms of 'substance', 'nature', and 'person' is the *sine qua non* of the gospel, then contextualizing the gospel for non-western cultures may be a hopeless dream after all. But if God's trinitarian being is conceived as his own reaching out of himself, then the Trinity, so far from being the Nemesis of contextualization, is actually a model of God's own self-contextualization.

1. The Trinity as the Missional Being of God

a) The Death and Resurrection of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The understanding of the Trinity as God's own mission-oriented nature has been made possible by a rediscovery of the doctrine's practical implications. The loss of this practical aspect of the Trinity began very early in Christian history. According to Catherine Mowry LaCugna, a shift in focus took place in the early development of the Trinity from the salvific plan of God as revealed in history (*oikonomia*) to a description of the intradivine relationships within the Godhead (*theologia*). Prior to the Council of Nicea, theologians sought to understand the Father, Son, and Spirit according to their respective roles in salvation history.[4]

By the time Augustine addressed the sending of the Son and the Spirit into the world, he argued that these sendings 'in time' do not reveal anything happening in the heart of God, but only mirror the eternal generations and processions within God.[5] Following Augustine, the medieval exposition of the Trinity was a discourse about God *in se*, with scarce reference to how God has acted in human history. Karl

4 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), pp. 19-205. See also Roger Haight, 'The Point of Trinitarian Theology', *Toronto Journal of Theology* 4 (1988): pp. 198-99.

5 Augustine *De Trin.*, II-IV; LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 86.

Rahner focused on the dénouement of the economic/immanent distinction in Thomas Aquinas, who divided the doctrine of God into two treatises: *De Deo Uno* (*On the One God*) and *De Deo Trino* (*On the Triune God*). The first treatise is characterized by philosophical abstraction, while the treatise on the triune God is limited to formal statements about 'a Trinity which is absolutely locked up within itself'.[6]

The leading magisterial reformers were quick to affirm the orthodox Trinity, although they were sometimes critical of the subtlety of scholastic discussions of it. The doctrine remained relatively untouched from the end of the Reformation to the beginning of the twentieth century.[7] Friedrich Schleiermacher's brief treatment in *The Christian Faith* began by stating: 'This doctrine itself, as ecclesiastically framed, is not an immediate utterance concerning the Christian self consciousness.'[8] By the dawn of the twentieth century, the doctrine of the Trinity 'was in danger of becoming a useless relic within the museum of dusty theological tomes'.[9]

The neglect of the Trinity came to a screeching halt when Karl Barth placed the doctrine at the beginning of his *Church Dogmatics*. Barth specifically tied the Trinity to the economy of God's self-revelation. Inasmuch as theology is *Christian* theology, which is dependent on revelation, it is immediately and always in the sphere of the Trinity. Revelation itself has a trinitarian structure: '*God* reveals Himself. He reveals Himself *through Himself*. He reveals *Himself*.'[10] Following Barth, the number of trinitarian monographs has accelerated right up to the present, including contributions from Continental Europe, Great Britain, Latin America, and the United States.

On the Catholic side, Rahner bemoaned the separation of the Trinity from practical Christian concerns. He stated: 'The isolation of the treatise of the Trinity *has* to be wrong. There *must* be a connection between Trinity and man. The Trinity is a mystery of *salvation*, otherwise it would never have been revealed.' Rahner's remedy was to reconnect what the tradition had severed by proposing 'the axiomatic unity of the "economic" and the "immanent" trinity'.[11] This unity has, in fact, become axiomatic for many thinkers.

Together, Barth and Rahner constitute the soil out of which has grown much of contemporary trinitarian thought. Practically all recent attempts to explicate the Trinity have

6 Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, transl. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp. 17-18. For the deleterious effects of this approach on Christian piety, see LaCugna, *God for Us*, pp. 111-42.

7 Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 67-75, 80.

8 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, transl. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 738.

9 Olson and Hall, *Trinity*, p. 81. See Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock, 1982), pp. 250-56.

10 Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. I/1 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, transl. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 296.

11 Rahner, *Trinity*, p. 21.

in common the attempt to reassert the doctrine's practical importance.

b) The Trinity and God's Relationship with the World

In line with the revival of the Economic Trinity, contemporary trinitarians are re-evaluating God's relationship with the world. In fact, the denial that the world could affect the being of God may have been behind the economic/immanent distinction in the first place. The doctrine of impassibility inherited from Greek philosophical theism would not allow mutuality in the divine-human relationship. An increasing number of theologians has grown impatient with the application of these ideas to the Christian God.[12] There is also a growing consensus that there is a connection between God's trinitarian nature and his relationship with the world. Several models have been proposed to describe this.

Eberhard Jüngel's primary work on the Trinity is manifestly a 'paraphrase' of Barth.[13] Jüngel addressed the issue of how God's essential being *in se* was aligned with his relatedness to creation. His solution involved an understanding of God's being as 'becoming', by which he meant eventful and related.[14] From the very beginning, however, Jüngel offered caveats about what this might mean.[15] The locus of God's eventful being is the *internal* relatedness of the Trinity. This protected God from any necessary relatedness with the world. Freedom, in fact, is the central presupposition for revelation; if God is compelled to reveal, it is not his *self*-revelation.[16] Revelation, however, does say more than the mere fact that God is free: 'The very fact of revelation tells us that it is proper to Him to distinguish Himself from Himself, i.e., to be God in Himself and in concealment, and yet at the same time to be God a second time in a very different way, namely, in manifestation.'[17] Even in this distinguishing of God from himself, however, God is not being other than himself. The ruling concept of revelation that this line of thinking leads to is that revelation is 'the repetition of God'.[18]

This kind of language hints at the precise relationship between the immanent and the economic Trinity. For this, Jüngel employed the concept of correspondence (*Entsprechung*).[19] The relatedness of God's nature *ad*

12 Richard Bauckham, '"Only the Suffering God Can Help": Divine Passibility in Modern Theology', Themelios 9 (1984): pp. 6-12.

13 Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Theology of Karl Barth*, transl. John Webster (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 7.

14 J. B. Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 18.

15 'The becoming in which God's being is cannot mean either an augmentation or a diminution of *God's being*.' Jüngel, *God's Being*, p. xxv, cf. p. 114.

16 Jüngel, *God's Being*, p. 31; Barth, *Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 321.

17 Barth, *Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 316, see p. 321.

18 Barth, *Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 299. Jüngel also speaks of the 'reiteration' and 'copy' of God in revelation (*God's Being*, pp. 109-10, 118).

19 Jüngel, *God's Being*, pp. 14-15, 35-36, 114. 'To the unity of Father, Son and Spirit among themselves corresponds their unity *ad extra*.' Barth, *Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 371.

intra grounds or makes possible God's entrance into relationships *ad extra*; the *ad extra* being of God brings the *ad intra* being of God to expression in revelation.[20] God's being *ad extra* corresponds to his being *ad intra*. So what is actually revealed (repeated, copied, reiterated) in the works of God *ad extra* is the prior internal self-relatedness of God. This is meant to safeguard the free grace of God, who chose to be related through Christ even though it was not 'necessary' for him to do this to be the God he is.[21]

The result of this schema, however, is that God's love for the world appears incidental to his being. It is true that God has freely chosen to be who he is in Jesus Christ, but the freedom of God requires that he could have done otherwise and been the same God. Revelation only repeats what was already and remains true about God. It seems ironic that what is revealed in God's actions for the world is not primarily God's love for the world, as John 3:16 would have it, but 'the self-giving in which *he* belongs to *himself*'.[22]

Karl Barth's concept of revelation as the 'self-interpretation of God' sounds promising at first, but by focusing on the 'fact' of revelation, the content of that revelation is not defined by the revelation *itself*. Rather, Barth logically extrapolates the meaning of the Trinity based on the 'fact' of revelation. This extrapolation is informed by a formal definition of freedom as bare self-determination.[23] This precludes the possibility that revelation is about the intrinsic importance of God's relationship with the world. Barth insists that revelation reveals God's love for the world, but what can this mean if it also reveals God's complete freedom to love or not to love? If, on the other hand, freedom were to be reinterpreted as always conditioned or defined by God's nature—as his ability to be who he really is—then God would not be free *from* creation, but free *for* it. This is the very approach suggested by Jürgen Moltmann.[24]

In keeping with his eschatological orientation, *Moltmann's* understanding of God's relationship with the world invites 'open possibilities' for the future for both creation and God.[25] His treatment of the Trinity really began in *The Crucified God*, which spoke of God's trinitarian history with the

20 Jüngel, *God's Being*, p. 37.

21 Jüngel, *God's Being*, pp. 99-100, 121-22; Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. II/1 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, transl. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), pp. 260, 280, 301.

22 Jüngel, *God's Being*, p. 41.

23 Barth, *Dogmatics*, II/1, pp. 301-06, 316.

24 Moltmann points out the aporia in Barth. God's decision to reveal either means that God's nature was already revelatory or that the decision to reveal constitutes a change in his nature. The solution is to recognize that a revelation that flows ineluctably from God's nature does not make him a prisoner, but only means that he is true to himself. Moltmann loves to quote 2 Tim. 2:13: 'for he cannot deny himself'. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, transl. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1981), pp. 53-55, 107-08.

25 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, transl. by James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 92.

world. In fact, *The Crucified God* seems to present the cross as the beginning of God's trinitarian being.[26] Broadening the scope, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* delineates the changes within the Trinity that ensue from a reciprocal relationship with the world. The narrative of God requires not just any trinitarian notion, but a 'social doctrine of the Trinity'.[27] This doctrine is the narrative account of the ever-widening fellowship of the trinitarian persons as they incorporate others into their community.[28] Of course, Moltmann does speak of divine unity, but he does not base it either on the unity of a divine substance or an absolute subject. God's unity is to be found in *perichoresis* or *circumincessio*: the interpenetrating and interrelating of the divine persons.[29]

The reciprocity of God's relationship with the world is experienced by God in the changing patterns of his inner-trinitarian relations. These changes are evident throughout salvation history, moving from Father—Spirit—Son (in the cross/resurrection event) to Father—Son—Spirit (in the exaltation of Christ to Lord and sending of the Spirit) to Spirit—Son—Father (in the consummation of the kingdom).[30] Of course, the cross marks a high-point in the inner-trinitarian experience of God: 'The Father forsakes the Son "for us"—that is to say, in order to become the God and Father of the forsaken.'[31] Since this is done in a 'deep community of will', however, the cross is paradoxically (or dialectically) the moment of the Father and Son's deepest separation and closest union. The Son is separated from the Father in his union with the God-forsaken, but inwardly united in his willful complicity with the Father. The union of wills engenders the Holy Spirit, who seals the breach and also, through the event, 'justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive'.[32]

The creation event is also part of God's trinitarian history, although creation in terms of 'act' and 'worker' is

26 If so, he has since demurred from that position. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 155.

27 Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. viii, 4-5.

28 Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. viii, 19, 64, 75; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, ed. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 243-46.

29 Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. 148-50, 174-75. Although Moltmann clearly tries to base his social Trinity in scripture, it is also clear that he sees this model as a corrective to political injustices and autocratic systems of government. Characterizing all monotheism as 'monarchism', he asserts, 'the notion of a divine monarch in heaven and on earth… generally provides the justification for earthly domination…and makes it a hierarchy, a "holy rule."' Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. 191-92.

30 Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. 90-96; Bauckham, *Theology*, pp. 15-16, 56.

31 Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 81, referring to 2 Cor. 5:21 and Gal. 3:13.

32 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, p. 244, see p. 243; Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. 82-83; Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 78. Bauckham notes the Hegelian structure of this schema (*Theology*, p. 155).

too 'male' an image to fit the reciprocity involved.[33] Moltmann also rejects any version of panentheism in which the Son of God turns out to be nothing other than the world. Nevertheless, he still describes the creation of the world as 'a part of the eternal love affair between the Father and the Son'.[34] In sharp contrast with Barth and Jüngel, for Moltmann God's inward relational structure is not the source of God's self-sufficiency. Rather, the inner love of 'like for like' provides the creative drive toward the essentially different. 'Like is not enough for like', so God seeks to include genuine others in his inner-trinitarian fellowship.[35] For the manner of creation, Moltmann borrows the kabbalistic notion of an 'inward' creation within the being of God. Through a kenotic act of self-limitation or self-withdrawal, 'The Creator has to concede to his creation the space in which it can exist'.[36] Creation, as a kenotic self-surrender, is a 'feminine concept' in which the world, so to speak, is formed within the womb of God.[37]

Clearly this model of the God-world relationship cannot leave the economic/immanent distinction unaffected. Moltmann's clearest retention of an immanent Trinity is in what he calls the 'doxological Trinity', which is the ultimate focus of Christian worship. God's economy shows that he is good, and so he is to be praised not only for the gifts he gives but for the goodness itself.[38] But even this praise must take into account the changes within God born of a reciprocal relationship with creation. These changes mean that the doxological Trinity is ultimately an eschatological reality: 'When everything is "in God" and "God is all in all", then the economic Trinity is raised into and transcended in the immanent Trinity.'[39] Moltmann describes the vision of the eschaton in which God will be 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28) in terms of a panentheistic vision and declares, 'That is *the home of the Trinity*.'[40]

The breadth and subtleties of Moltmann's theology make it difficult to critique in a short space. No aspect of Moltmann's theology has stirred more controversy than his social doctrine of the Trinity. He claims that the language of the New Testament leads inevitably to such a doctrine.[41] Since he offers a narrative theology that is ostensibly a restatement of the biblical narrative, the most important question is, 'Is this really the story of God and the world that the Bible tells?'[42] Aside

33 Moltmann, *Trinity*, 98-99.

34 Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 59; Bauckham, *Theology*, p. 58.

35 Moltmann, *Trinity*, 59, 106.

36 Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 59, see pp. 108-09.

37 Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 109.

38 Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 153.

39 Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 161.

40 Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 105. See Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, transl. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 98-103, 86; Bauckham, *Theology*, p. 17. This future is the 'Sabbath' of God, when all of creation will enjoy the kingdom of glory in mutual friendship and with no need of authoritarian structures. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 279.

41 Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. 65-94.

42 There are many legitimate critiques of Moltmann's objections to monotheism. That will not be the focus of the following evaluation.

from the fact that the texts he cites (e.g., Rom. 8:32; Gal. 2:20) are open to different interpretations, there are numerous other texts that indicate that the Son is doing precisely the work of the Father in such a way that the Son's activities are revelatory of the Father.[43] Moltmann portrays the sending of the Son as the moment of differentiation in God in which God becomes open to relationship—first with himself through the Son, then with humanity.[44] Here, as in Jüngel and Barth, the sending of the Son is used first to say something about the self-differentiation of God in himself and only secondarily about God's love for the world.

It is true that, in a sense, Christians participate in the Son's relationship with the Father. But is it accurate to say that the sending of the Son *increased* the fellowship between the Son and the Father? In fact, John's language of sending does not support the idea that the Son is a separate centre of activity in the Godhead, but serves to underscore the Son's ability to reveal the Father and accomplish his work?[45] In other words, the Son did not come to reveal his relationship with the Father, but the Father's love for the world. So, Ted Peters concludes, 'The New Testament does not speak of the Son as a divine source of activity alongside and equal to the Father. The Father works in the Son.'[46]

Other questions arise with regard to Moltmann's vision of the cross, which is at least partly determined by the Hegelian structure of his grand narrative. Specifically, the cross enacts the dialectic of separation and reunion. Richard Bauckham explains, 'God suffers the estrangement of sinful and suffering humanity from himself and includes it within the loving fellowship of his trinitarian being.'[47] Of course, scripture itself contains many models of the atonement. The question is, is this one of them? Does it grow out of the narrative of scripture, or does it arise as scripture is read through the lenses of a certain dialectical philosophy of history?

As an answer to the supposed inadequacies of monotheism, the social doctrine of the Trinity constitutes a dangerous example of overkill. It avoids individualism, but risks the unity of God in the process. But if Moltmann wants to posit a God who is reciprocally related to the world, a fully social Trinity is not the only option. This has been demonstrated by Ted Peters and Catherine Mowry LaCugna.

Ted Peters and LaCugna share Moltmann's conviction that God is intrinsically related to the world

43 See Mt. 11:27; Jn. 1:18; Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:18-19; and Eph. 4:32-5:2. Moltmann acknowledges some of these texts, but still interprets them in line with his social Trinity. Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 64.

44 Moltmann, *Trinity*, p. 75.

45 See Jn. 3:17, 34; 4:34; 5:23-30, 36-38; 6:29, 38-39, 44, 57; 7:16-18, 28-33; 8:16-18, 26-29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44-49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18-25; 20:21.

46 Ted Peters, *God* as *Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 108.

47 Bauckham, *Theology*, p. 56.

through his trinitarian being.[48] What they share with each other is an employment of Rahner's axiom to the highest degree. It is not that there is no immanent Trinity, but that God 'as he is in himself' really *is* economic. Peters believes the way to construct a unified divine life that is relational is 'to conceive of God as in the process of self-constituting, a process that includes God's saving relationship to the world right in the definition of who God is'.[49]

Nevertheless, even in Moltmann Peters finds a residue of the Barth/Jüngel approach that sees the economic Trinity as a window through which to view the inner-trinitarian relations that pre-date and ground the economy. Peters asserts that such a foundation in the immanent trinitarian love is simply not necessary: 'Why not just go all the way and affirm a God whose personhood is itself being constituted through God's ongoing relation to the creation?'[50] This does not mean that Peters dispenses with traditional concerns altogether. He is particularly concerned that an approach like Moltmann's is 'a thinly veiled tritheism'.[51]

'God is love' (1 Jn. 4:16) does not refer, as Moltmann thinks, to the intradivine love of like for like that grounds the love for a genuine other. 'God is love' already and only refers to God's other-seeking nature.[52]

One of Peters's most unique contributions is his development of the temporal aspect of God, which is a corollary to relationality.[53] He embraces Moltmann's vision of an eschatological Trinity. However, the idea that the immanent Trinity is the eschatological goal of the economic Trinity presents problems. What, for example, is gained by saying that God as he relates to the world now is trinitarian in one sense, but will be trinitarian in another sense at the eschaton? If the Bible sanctions the notion of development in God, why should the goal of that development be defined as the Trinity? Historically speaking, the doctrine of the Trinity arose from a reflection on the *present* experience of God's salvation. God is Trinity now because he is outward-reaching now. The Trinity is not so much the future of God; it is the way of God to the future.

The structure of LaCugna's work can be characterized as a movement from 'deconstruction' to 'reconstruction'.[54] After she traces the wrong turns that led to the irrelevance of the Trinity (Part 1), she begins to work out a solution (Part 2). Echoing Rahner,

48 Peters, *God as Trinity*, p. 102. LaCugna states, 'If it is the very nature of God to be related (to-be-toward, to-be-for), then it is difficult to see that God can be *God* without creation' ('The Relational God: Aquinas and Beyond', *Theological Studies* 46 [December 1985]: p. 661).

49 Peters, *God as Trinity*, p. 82.

50 Peters, *God as Trinity*, p. 95.

51 Peters, *God as Trinity*, p. 35. This is not a direct indictment of Moltmann, for Peters recognizes that Moltmann uses a more nuanced understanding of personhood. Nevertheless, Peters is clearly uneasy about the affects of Moltmann's model on the unity of God.

52 It is a little ironic that Barth was one of the persons to see most clearly that 1 Jn. 4:8 and 16 do not refer to intra-divine but to economic love (*Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 275).

53 Peters, *God as Trinity*, pp. 146-87.

54 Grenz, *Triune God*, p. 149.

that solution involves the reconnection of *oikonomia* and *theologia*. In the economy is seen 'a personal self-sharing by which God is forever bending toward God's "other" (cf. Eph. 1:3-14).'[55] For the actual structure of God's saving activity, LaCugna offers the graphic representation of a parabola. In some respects, this 'chiastic model' bears similarities to Moltmann, although it is not a matter of changing patterns within the life of God. The movement of emanation (*exitus*) and return (*reditus*) is the ecstatic movement of God first outward in creation and then back into union with God. Since this trinitarian movement results in reconciliation or 'divinization' (*theosis*), there is no clear distinction between the doctrines of God and salvation. But that does not mean, as has sometimes been charged, that LaCugna dissolves God into salvation, for 'God's presence to us does not exhaust without remainder the absolute mystery of God'.[56]

The re-unification of *theologia* and *oikonomia* precedes an analysis of personal being in an effort to establish an 'ontology of relation'.[57] LaCugna's more nuanced understanding of divine personhood offers new possibilities for understanding the doctrine of the Trinity as the missional being of God—his being on mission. She shows how a fully personal view of God can satisfy the relational concerns of Moltmann without making God into a society.

c) The Trinity as the Missional Being of God

Revitalizing the Western Trinity

LaCugna's approach could be conceived as a revitalization of the Augustinian psychological analogy of the Trinity. She states, 'Augustine's psychological analogy for the Trinity is inadequate… not because it is psychological but because his psychology and anthropology tend to focus on the individual soul.'[58] Augustine had located a vestige of the Trinity in the psychology of individual persons.[59] But if the analogy were based not on a single person, but on the ecstatic person-in-relation, then the relational Trinity might yet find an analogy in human being. The vestige of the Trinity is the *imago Dei* not in the isolated individual, but in the

55 LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 222, see pp. 211, 231. It is important to note that LaCugna does not deny *theologia*. Rather, she denies the traditional distinction between *theologia* and *oikonomia* that allows speculation on the inner life of God without attention first to God's saving acts.

56 LaCugna, *God for Us*, pp. 228, 320-21.

57 LaCugna, *God for Us*, pp. 243-317. For this she draws primarily from John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1957); idem, *Persons in Relation* (Amherst, NewYork: Humanity Books, 1961); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); and various liberation theologies.

58 LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 103.

59 While this was developed in several ways, his final presentation was that of the mind's remembering, understanding, and loving God (*De Trin*., 14.15-21). For a summary of Augustine's analogies, see Thomas A. Wassmer, 'The Trinitarian Theology of Augustine and His Debt to Plotinus', *Harvard Theological Review* 53 (1960): pp. 261-68.

personal being that seeks relationships. But this is not Moltmann's suggestion that the *imago Dei* be located in a community of divine persons. The trinitarian God is personal in that his essential nature is to seek relationships with a genuine other.

In addition to the psychological analogy, another of Augustine's enduring contributions is the image of the Spirit as the common gift or 'bond of love' (*vinculum amoris*) between the Father and the Son.[60] At first glance, this seems to be a classic case of immanent trinitarian speculation. On the other hand, Moltmann enlists the idea of the Spirit as the bond of love to say that the Spirit also includes humans in the divine fellowship.[61] In the same way that the psychological analogy can be redeemed through a more relational psychology, Augustine's vision of the Spirit as the bond of love can also be given an economic focus. Whatever the Spirit's role in the intradivine relations, the Spirit is the bond of love joining humans with God and with each other.[62]

The Perfections of God in Relational Perspective

The suggestion that God's being is constituted through relationship is not a simple adjustment to the tradition. For many, this move gives up too much of the classical emphases on the aseity and perfection of God. These are difficult questions, but trinitarians who accept the shift to relationality have provided some suggestions for affirming traditional concerns, albeit in a decidedly different key. LaCugna, for example, notes that God is still incomprehensible. This is not because he resides in the realm of immutable substance, but because he, like all personal beings, retains an element of mystery. Personal beings are never dissolved into the other, which would supplant the idea of relationship with that of monism.[63] Likewise, the very notion of divine perfection can be rethought in light of relationality: 'Divine perfection is the antithesis of self-sufficiency, rather it is the absolute capacity to be who and what one is by being for and from another.'[64] As the personal being par excellence, God seeks perfectly, loves enduringly, unites eternally. This is his perfection.

But does the image of God as constituted through relationship with the world mean that God is weak and dependent? The question itself betrays a metaphysical bias toward independence. Relational being is not 'weak' because it needs; the yearning of love is not a deficiency, but a part of its peculiar perfection. Nevertheless, a vestige of the independence of God is insinuated in one of the most important

60 Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, vol. 1 of *Studies in Historical Theology*, transl. Edmund J. Fortman (Petersham, Mass.: St. Bede's, 1982), pp. 110-21; Fortman, *Triune God*, pp. 145-46. See Augustine *De Trin*. 6.7; 5.15-16, 29, 47.

61 Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. 169-70. Augustine may also be interpreted this way. Margerie, *Christian Trinity*, pp. 112, 116-21.

62 LaCugna, *God for Us*, pp. 296-300.

63 LaCugna, *God for Us*, pp. 289, 300-04.

64 LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 304.

insights of the contemporary analysis of personhood: di-polarity. LaCugna states, 'Personhood requires the balance of self-love and self-gift…. Personhood emerges in the balance between individuation and relationality.'[65] To say that God is personal does not mean that he has lost all manner of independence in heteronomy. Personal relationships require a stable pole at both ends so that personal being is fulfilled rather than obliterated in relationship. While personal being is 'ecstatic'—able to come out of itself—the event of *ecstasis* does not result in the loss of independent existence, but the enrichment of it.

While it would take considerably more space to develop this notion, the idea of *ecstasis* grounds not only the ability of persons to relate to one another, but a measure of self-relation and self-reflection too. There is a structural similarity here to Moltmann's notion of the love of like for like that grounds love for the other, but this does not require a full-fledged community in God. As a personal being, God in his self-reflection chose to create and love outwardly. This notion has the potential to mediate between the emanationist view that tends to present creation as a mechanical inevitability and the view that a completely self-sufficient God arbitrarily chose to create.

As a personal being, God did 'decide' to create, although any other choice would have been counter to his own relational nature and would have left him unfulfilled. It is not that God is 'ontologically' dependent on the world—as if he would cease to be without the world. But if God's love for the world is to be as meaningful to him as the biblical revelation seems to indicate, it certainly cannot be incidental. In the same way a personal relationship can be enriching without being mandatory, God freely chose to create a world in order to have a meaningful relationship with it.

The 'Point' of the Trinity

The 'point' of the Trinity has two referents. First, it refers to what the doctrine of the Trinity actually says about God. The second point asks, 'What are the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for Christian living?'[66] Regarding the first point, Roger Haight looks for the point of trinitarian theology in the original impetus for trinitarian language—the experience of salvation. Within the context of Jewish monotheism, salvation mediated through Christ and in the Holy Spirit required a new way of thinking about God. So the doctrine of the Trinity is about the mediation of salvation. It 'is not intended to be information about the internal life of God, but about how God relates to human beings.'[67] This means that the Trinity could be called the theological statement of the gospel; it is the gospel explained with reference to the being of God. It states that God has a missional essence. The economic focus does not limit God's being to saving humans, but it does say that God is salvific to the core.

65 LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 290.

66 The second point will be addressed in the next section.

67 Haight, 'Trinitarian Theology', p. 199. See LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 380.

2. The Trinity and Christian Missions

a) The Trinity as a Basis for Missions

Theological foundations are important, but if theology stops at the first point of the doctrine of the Trinity, it has stopped short of God's point. That point is the goal of the mission of God himself. The purpose of the incarnation was not to reveal that 'God is relational', or that 'God becomes', or that 'God is temporal in himself'. As valid as such extrapolations may be, God does not just want humans to *know* that he is relational, he wants to *have relationships with them*. Consequently, the theological insight that God is on mission is not just a datum to be pondered; it is a call first to enter into relationship with God, and then to join God's mission to bring others into relationship with him. As John Thompson puts it, 'God is a God of mission, which means a God who sends.'[68]

The missiological implications of the Trinity were not a major theme among twentieth century theologians.[69] On the other hand, in a paper read at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932, Karl Barth became one of the first to articulate missions as God's own activity.[70] For Barth, 'the goal of missionary work is to make a missionary church, to testify to the nations the God who wills to make them too his witnesses and missionaries'.[71] Barth's thought became influential in the International Missionary Council and reached its peak at the 1952 Willingen Conference. Although the term *missio Dei* was not used there, the conference unambiguously connected the idea of mission with the trinitarian nature of God. The mission of the church was, so to speak, taken out of the doctrine of ecclesiology and resituated within the Father's missionary sendings of the Son and Spirit as an extension of God's own mission.[72] The term *missio Dei*, then, 'indicates that mission is not primarily a human work but the work of the triune God.'[73]

The sentiments of the Willingen Conference have been echoed by several contemporary trinitarians. For Moltmann, the church 'discovers itself as one element in the movements of the divine sending, gathering together and experience. It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the Church, creating a church

68 John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 69.

69 There are some exceptions: P. T. Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981); Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 7.

70 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), p. 389.

71 Thompson, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 77.

72 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

73 Thompson, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 68. For a summary of the concept of the *missio Dei* in theology of missions, see Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 389-93.

as it goes on its way.'[74] Thompson offers a similar statement: 'The *ultimate basis* of mission is the triune God—the Father who created the world and sent his Son by the Holy Spirit to be our salvation. The *proximate basis* of mission is the redemption of the Son by his life, death, and resurrection, and the *immediate power* of mission is the Holy Spirit. It is, in trinitarian terms, a *missio Dei*.'[75] Finally, LaCugna avers,

> Living trinitarian faith means living as Jesus Christ lived, *in persona Christi*: preaching the gospel; relying totally on God; offering healing and reconciliation; rejecting laws, customs, conventions that place persons beneath rules; resisting temptation; praying constantly; eating with modern-day lepers and other outcasts; embracing the enemy and the sinner; dying for the sake of the gospel if it is God's will.[76]

b) The Trinity as a Model for Missions

The Trinity as a 'model for missions' does not suggest that the organization of missionary agencies can be developed through a study of the Trinity—as if, for example, such organizations should be somehow 'three-fold'. Nevertheless, the connection between God's trinitarian nature and the *missio Dei* does suggest certain criteria for the church's missionary efforts, which 'are only authentic insofar as they reflect participation in the mission of God'.[77]

The Self-Contextualization of God

Barth's reconnection of the Trinity with revelation suggests that the Trinity can be designated as the self-contextualization of God. This is a far cry from the obscure doctrine of substances and persons that epitomized theological obfuscation. Against the view of the Trinity as a hindrance to missions, Colin Gunton asserts 'that because the theology of the Trinity has so much to teach about the nature of

74 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, transl. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 64. Immediately after saying this, however, Moltmann goes on to speak in ecumenical tones of the Spirit's work that creates the 'church' 'wherever "the manifestation of the Spirit" (I Cor. 12:7) takes place'. He clearly means that the 'church' is not limited to explicit acceptance of or proclamation of the gospel. Rather, the criteria are those of 'uniting of men with one another', 'uniting of society with nature', and 'uniting of creation with God'. Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 65. Bosch offers a brief account of how the concept of the *missio Dei* was transformed in the ecumenical context to refer to a presumed universal work of the Spirit in world history and other religions. This mutation of Barth's original insight has actually served to exclude the church's involvement in the mission to the extent that any Christological focus is interpreted as arrogant and ethnocentric. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 391-92.

75 Thompson, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 72. 'The task of the church is to bring people not simply to salvation, which could be self-centered and have a certain aspect of egoism in it. Rather, it is to enable them to be witnesses.' Thompson, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 74.

76 LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 401.

77 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 391.

our world and life within it, it is or could be the centre of Christianity's appeal to the unbeliever, as the good news of a God who enters into free relations of creation and redemption with his world'.[78] The renewed vision of God as a God of loving relationship might have the power to re-focus the gospel on the original call to reconciliation with a loving Creator. The gospel proclaims God's desire and ability to be in relationship with anyone who accepts him. Although the traditional language of *ousia* and *hypostasis* was, in fact, part of the contextualization of the gospel for another generation and culture, the Trinity itself speaks of the mandate to re-contextualize the gospel in every age.

The Trinity also implies that reconciliation calls for a personal encounter. For God, that personal encounter was infinitely costly. Contextualization is costly; it requires meeting people where they are. So the mission of the church is not only to take a message to a people; it is to live a message among them so as to make God visible again. If the church's mission is to extend the *missio Dei*, then it can be nothing short of continuing that embodiment of God in Christ among the people of the world. So the kenotic self-contextualization of God has implications for Christian behaviour in the doing of missions. From the Old Testament imperative to reflect God's holy nature in holy living, God's very nature has included an ethical charge. Likewise, the kenotic self-contextualization of God precludes coercive or manipulative missionary practices. If relationships are mutual, they must be entered into freely.

But already another issue arises. The renewed focus on the economic Trinity seems naturally to highlight the particularity of God's self-contextualization in Jesus Christ. So the church is continuing that contextualization as it preaches a contextualized message of Christ and tries to embody Christ in a contextualized way. The problem here for contemporary theology regards the stance of the church toward the world's religions.

The Trinity and Other Religions

Contemporary theology has seen a ground-swell of interest in a 'theology of religions.' The motivations behind this movement are many, but they certainly include the contemporary climate of multi-culturalism and post-modernism.[79] Raimundo Panikkar suggests that since the Greek philosophical tradition in which Christian theology first developed has been discredited, perhaps other religious traditions can offer concepts and frameworks to illuminate Christian teaching. Panikkar even incorporates the Trinity itself into his interreligious vision.[80]

78 Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 7.

79 See Paul F. Knitter, 'Preface', in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987), pp. vii-xii.

80 Panikkar, 'The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges'; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Does the Trinity Belong in a Theology of Religions? On Angling in the Rubicon and the "Identity" of God', in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 45.

In order to understand how a concept like the Trinity could find application in religious pluralism, Stephen Williams offers the following consideration:

> We encounter belief in an indescribable ultimate ground; there is conviction of a personal dialogical relationship with the ultimate; and people experience the fathomless depth of their own being. Now the Christian belief in God as Trinity embraces belief in a transcendent principle, a personal manifestation, and an immanent ground of all things. Such a belief suggests how the various spiritualities described may be possible and all have their grounding in an ultimate.[81]

The interreligious Trinity also builds upon Augustine's notion of vestiges of the Trinity. Here, however, the vestiges are located in the universal religious experiences of humans. So, for example, according to Nicholas Berdyaev: 'Wherever there is life there is the mystery of three-in-oneness'.[82] Similarly, Paul Tillich linked the symbol of the Trinity to 'the intrinsic dialectics of experienced life'.[83]

Because of the historical specificity of Jesus, 'What seems to unite pluralistic trinitarian theologies of religion is the role of the Spirit as the "universalizer." The Spirit resists the reduction of Being (Father) or Logos (Son); consequently, no one religious "form" can lay claim to have caught the fullness of reality.'[84] The Spirit allows the salvific will of God to move in and through other religious narratives without the limitations implicit in 'Christ'. But such an interpretation of the Spirit seems merely to give Eastern religious categories priority over Christian revelation, usually resulting in a more-or-less monistic version of reality.[85] Williams is especially concerned that interreligious trinities are built upon essentially impersonal views of God as 'the Ultimate', and so on. He asks about the criteria for calling an image 'trinitarian'. Beyond the fact that such interreligious trinities have a structure that includes a unity of plural elements, why should any and all notions of unity-in-plurality be described as 'trinitarian'?[86]

Any suggestion that humans have access to God aside from a contextual revelation is suspect for several rea-

81 Stephen Williams, 'The Trinity and "Other Religions"' in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 27.

82 Nicholas Berdyaev, *Christian Existentialism*, transl. by W. Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 53, quoted in Peters, *God as Trinity*, p. 73.

83 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 283-94.

84 Vanhoozer, 'Does the Trinity Belong?' p. 62. See Gavin D'Costa, 'Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality' in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990), p. 19. See the criticism of Rahner's pneumatocentric theology in Gary Badcock, 'Karl Rahner, the Trinity, and Religious Pluralism' in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 143-54.

85 Vanhoozer, 'Does the Trinity Belong?' p. 66.

86 Williams, 'Trinity and "Other Religions"', p. 28.

sons. The very notion of a non-contextual understanding of anything is dubious. The contextual revelation of God in Christ is often derided as the 'scandal of particularity'. On the other hand, if God is personal, then certain realities obtain regarding how a relationship with him is possible. For example, as in all relationships, there must be a stable pole for relationship. God is not simply an amorphous 'Ultimate', but a person who has encountered the world in concrete expressions. 'If… we do believe in a personal God', Williams argues, 'particular revelation is not the scandal that it is often thought to be in light of other religious traditions. How more effectively can a personal God communicate the truth about his nature than by appearing personally in the world, if that is possible? And how can personal appearance in the world be possible in its fullness unless God remains God in heaven while God is also God on earth?'[87]

Williams's observation is not without difficulties. For the great majority of Christians, access to God through Christ has not included a personal encounter with the historical Jesus; it has been mediated through the Spirit and the gospel. But the biblical teaching on the Spirit does not justify a facile equation of the Spirit with a vague principle of unity behind all particular religious experiences. The role of the Spirit in the New Testament is not to unite pell-mell, but to bring all things to unity through Christ (John 15:26; 16:14).

In a similar vein, Haight argues that epistemology necessarily entails a dual mediation of revelation: objective and subjective.

> Since all human knowledge and self-awareness are bound to the world and history, and are mediated to consciousness through the world and history, so too a clear or explicit awareness of God must be mediated by an external objective medium. But that external medium of itself will not actually mediate an effective internal experience of God, without which there is no real self-communication or revelation, without an internal principle of appropriation.[88]

Haight intends to identify these two mediums as the objective revelation of God in Christ and the subjective appropriation of God's presence in the Spirit. The point is that the structure of the Trinity is fitted to the needs of human knowing and relating. Or, conversely, one might say that humans are designed for relationship with the trinitarian God who is objectively revealed in Christ and subjectively experienced in the Holy Spirit.

But trinitarian exclusivism may not be the final word on the Trinity's significance for interreligious dialogue. Thompson clearly affirms the Trinity as the distinctively Christian vision of God, but he believes that image of God can still provide the conversation of religions with the 'true grammar of dialogue'.[89] This means three things for Thompson. First, there is an inherent

87 Williams, 'Trinity and "Other Religions"', p. 38.

88 Haight, 'Trinitarian Theology', p. 197.

89 Thompson, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 79, quoting Newbigin, *Open Secret*, pp. 206-7.

unity in humankind, since all are creations of the one triune God. This unity suggests the possibility of elements of divine truth—'parables of the Kingdom'—appearing outside of the church, although they do not carry the authority of Christian revelation. Second, interreligious dialogue must be carried out from the Christian side on the basis of the uniqueness of Christ. For the third point, Thompson quotes Lesslie Newbigin: 'We participate in the dialogue, believing and expecting that the Holy Spirit can and will use this dialogue to do his own sovereign work, to glorify Jesus by converting to him both the partners in the dialogue.'[90] These last two points, of course, will be the least palatable for the more pluralistically-minded.

3. Conclusion

Several of the theologians introduced above have suggested that a trinitarian theology built on a relational model of God does not simply surrender the traditional perfections of God; it seeks to reinterpret them in line with revelation. So Moltmann contends that the impassible God of substantialist metaphysics is the deficient God who cannot love, and LaCugna argues that God's perfection is precisely his ability to enter into genuinely mutual relationships. These insights can be correlated with Jesus' parabolic statement that new wine requires new wineskins (Mt. 9:14-17). The new perspective on the relationality of God claims that for centuries the true meaning of the revelation of love has been straining against the old and rigid structures of substantialist metaphysics.

Contemporary theologians have been trying to construct a new intellectual framework—new wineskins—that will be malleable enough not to distort the self-revelation of God. Relationship has emerged as the central motif in this effort. God's revelation speaks of a God who has come out of himself in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit in order to establish mutually enriching relationships with his creatures. God, as Trinity, is seeking through the Son and the Spirit to establish relationships with fallen humanity. That is the mission of God; that is the mission of the church.

90 Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 210, quoted in Thompson, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 79.