

# Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 38 • Number 2 • April 2014

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Toward a Transcultural Trinitarian Worldview

J. Scott Horrell

**Keywords:** *God, immanent and economic Trinity, human being, divine justice-forgiveness, Islam, , global collaboration.*

Broadly across Christian traditions today, the renaissance of Trinitarian studies continues to yield productive insights and needed correctives regarding the implications of faith in the tripersonal God. Some ideas align fairly readily with classical Christian faith, whereas others appear more distant from the Trinitarian creeds of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) as historically interpreted. In primary terms, the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that the only true God eternally exists as three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one in essence, united in glory, and distinct in relations.

On the one hand church fathers and present-day scholars alike admonish readers to beware of over speculation regarding the Godhead, of trying to say too much about what cannot finally be said. The apophatic nature of Trinitar-

ian confession indicates that creeds exist both to define the boundaries and to preserve the mystery of the transcendent God. As William Placher comments,

We are asking about the very essence of God, and that essence is too great for our understanding. We must cling closely to Scripture and to the logic of salvation, flickering candles as it were against what seems such a great darkness but is in fact, of course, invisible to our mind's eyes because of the brilliance of its too great light.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, even as creedal language helps guard what can finally never be said, God has spoken in the Son and by the Spirit through acts in history and in the written word. The very centre of the biblical message is that the triune God comes to us and

makes known his personal richness in mercy as well as judgment. We are invited to know this God through Christ and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds through the Word and by the Spirit. The theme of this article is that some things *can* be said about the Christian God in ways that may and should unite all believers.

This article proposes to outline a transcultural Trinitarian worldview that sets forth a universal framework of basic Christian faith for believers today. The different sections are meant as suggestions in the process of developing what it means for Christian believers to think about God and our human reality. I presuppose that the biblical basis and historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity are essentially and correctly expressed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.<sup>2</sup> Yet the Creed should be understood both to contain the Trinitarian mystery and to open up within that framework fresh understandings among the nations of the world. Rather than a detailed discussion of any single aspect, this work is designed to be a rather simple synthesis of important Trinitarian themes.

The overview traces the Godhead's internal relationships from before creation, then discusses how Christians might think about God in relation to the physical universe, to themselves, and to others created in the image of God. In addition, the themes of divine love, holiness, and human redemption are briefly contrasted to non-Christian

perspectives. In the penultimate section I posit several basic formulations about God, time, and space. The article concludes with two observations. Hence, these aspects of a theology of Trinity are designed to form a biblical-theological superstructure that unifies varying contextualized Christian perspectives of faith.

Integrated into the work is the conviction that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity with its broad-sweeping implications for human existence is a powerful apologetic for Christian faith amidst the cultures and belief systems of the world. Indeed, far from an embarrassment to avoid or a conundrum to try to explain, a biblical Trinitarian worldview is the most persuasive and truly beautiful invitation possible to believe in the Christian God.

Of course, any such framework calls for considerable humility before the mystery of God. Again, apophatic or negative theology—the theology of 'not-knowing'—surely has its place. Yet equally essential for a basic global Christian worldview is an open-handed working together among international believers in critiquing, correcting, and nuancing these kinds of ideas. Theology as Trinitarian worldview must arise from truly global dialogue with a chorus of voices.

## I The Trinity Before Creation

Tertullian wrote, 'Before all things God was alone, being his own universe, location, everything. He was alone, however, in the sense that there was nothing external to himself.'<sup>3</sup> Before

<sup>1</sup> William C. Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Commonly denominated the Nicene Creed, cf. Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Ancient Christian Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, 5.

**J. Scott Horrell** (ThM, ThD Dallas Theological Seminary) is Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. He serves as adjunct faculty at the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS, Amman), the Seminario Teológico CentroAmericano (SETECA, Guatemala), and the Centro de Desenvolvimento de Liderança (CDL) in Maputo, Mozambique. Half of the author's ministry life has been in Brazil and other countries of the world.

any and all creation, it must be said that God was completely self-sufficient and all-inclusive. All that existed was God. There was nothing that was not God. Zwingli opined, 'Since we know that God is the source and creator of all things, we cannot conceive of anything before or beside him which is not also of him. For if anything could exist which was not of God, God would not be infinite.'<sup>4</sup> In the absolute beginning, God was everything.

This Supreme Being is infinite in each of his attributes. Rather than envelop *all* opposites as does the God of pantheism, the God of the Bible eternally exists in absolutely perfect nature of which nothing is greater. That is, God is pure and consistent in being—good and not evil, holy and not unholy, immutable and not ever-changing. And God is free. In one sense, God eternally chooses to be himself. He is what he is both by perfect nature and by choice.

The God who resides outside our dimensions cannot be exhaustively comprehended. He can be known in part yet he stands beyond us in mystery. Any true understanding we have of the transcendent God derives from God's gracious revelation given in finite categories and conditions that have meaning for us as finite beings. Nevertheless, what God has revealed of himself is authentic to who he is and wonderfully sufficient to know and to love him.

Moreover, the Supreme Being is profoundly personal. 'Though alone', before creation, Hippolytus remarks,

'he was multiple'.<sup>5</sup> God reveals himself as three eternally distinct persons. God is not fundamentally one God onto which a Trinity is added or flows forth. The absolute centre of God is Trinity.

Many in Christian tradition affirm that God as such has one mind, one will, and one activity. Others affirm that each person of the Godhead has distinct self-consciousness with mind, will, and actions in absolute harmony. In either case each member of the Godhead eternally indwells the other (termed *perichoresis*) without confusion of persons ('I am in the Father and the Father is in me' Jn. 14:11). In the mystery of the Trinity, the three persons coexist in unfathomable harmony in the one divine nature. Rather than some ethereal abstraction, the 'centre' of the Trinity is something like nuclear fusion.

The shared glory, love, and communication of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit forever distinguish the Christian God from all other forms of theism. Thus, the persons of the Trinity can be known together as *one* yet also identified distinctly and worshipped.<sup>6</sup>

As the church fathers and the Nicene Creed affirm, the Father is the eternal Father of the eternal Son. Traditionally the Father is the unoriginate Origin, the Son is the eternal *only begotten* Son ('begotten but not made'), and the Holy Spirit eternally *proceeds*. As the Athanasian Creed would later articulate,

So the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God; and yet not

<sup>4</sup> Zwingli, 'An Exposition of the Faith', in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (London: SCM Press, 1953), 249.

<sup>5</sup> Hippolytus, *Contra Noetum*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> See John Owen's *Communion with the Triune God*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

three Gods but one God. So the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord; and yet not three Lords but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by Christian truth to acknowledge every Person by himself to be both God and Lord; so are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, there be three Gods or three Lords. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone, not made nor created but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and the Son, not made nor created nor begotten but proceeding. So there is one Father not three Fathers, one Son not three Sons, and one Holy Spirit not three Holy Spirits. And in this Trinity there is nothing before or after, nothing greater or less, but the whole three Persons are coeternal together and coequal. So that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Trinity in Unity and the Unity in Trinity is to be worshipped.

The divine Being, before any and all creation, existed as all-inclusive, self-sufficient, and tripersonal in the high concept of Trinity.

## II The Trinity and Impersonal Creation

Although a few people suppose a created order that is co-eternal in the past with God, classical Christian faith declares that creation has been called into existence out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). There was an absolute beginning. When God created, therefore, he deliberately chose to limit himself. While yet fully infinite, God now created something that was not himself.

In creating something out of absolute nothing, God no longer remained all-inclusive. The rock, the tree, and the zebra were not God. In contrast to all pantheistic theologies, the God of the Bible did not flow or emanate out into the physical world. On the contrary, all space, energy, and matter exist as God's creation and artistry and not as his essence. Nevertheless, the existence of these dimensions is wholly sustained by the personal Creator. As Thomas Finger observes, as radical as it may be,

The Trinitarian God remains distinctly *other*. God's intertwining with creatures thus evokes heightened wonder, for it proceeds not from natural necessity—not because we already are God's body—but from grace.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from sin, all creation is centripetal to God's character. The triune God himself is the centre of everything. Bonaventure believed in the actual presence of the Trinity in the universe: 'The created world is like a book in which its Maker, the Trinity, shines forth, is represented, and can be read...'<sup>8</sup> Richard Foster comments, 'God loves matter. In his original creative acts God affirmed matter again and again, declaring it good at every point along the way. We, therefore, should take the material world quite seriously.'<sup>9</sup>

Whether three-leaf clovers, identical triplets, or the three subatomic

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Finger, 'Modern Alienation and Trinitarian Creation', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17:2 (April 1993) 204.

<sup>8</sup> Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 2, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 260.

quarks that form the protons and neutrons of the universe—and a thousand other Trinitarian analogies—all creation reflects something of the Creator. Yet all illustrations fall short.

The question of *why* God created is not easily answered, although classical Christian faith responds in the final sense ‘to the praise of his glory’ (Eph. 1:12-13). Many surmise that the divine motivation for creation is best found in the overflow of loving self-givingness between the three persons of the Godhead. The deep love and joyful relations among the members of the Trinity are manifested in the creation of that which is *other* than God—especially other personal beings that might know and enjoy relationship, service, and worship of this God.

Summarily, the triune God brought the created order into existence out of nothing. He sustains it and in that sense is personally related to all dimensions of existence. Yet God is not to be confused with that which he created and sustains.

### III The Trinity and the Unity-Diversity of the Universe

The tension between the unity and diversity of the universe is one of the great philosophic problems of history. Since the ancient philosophers, humanity has lacked a solution to this enigma. Is reality constituted by a single cosmic principle that determines all existence (Fate or God)? That is, is the universe an absolute *one*? Or is the universe an absolute *many*? Is ultimate reality located in a diversity in which the particulars are random or free (whether by chance or by choice)?

At the pole of unity, one is locked in

cosmic determinism. Whether religious or secular, I am but a tiny cog within a massive machine over which I have no control and in which I have no basis for choice or personal meaning. Such a perspective is evident in the religious fatalism of ancient Greek religions, or the passivism of Advaita Vedanta, traditional Islam (*inshallah* ‘If-God-wills’), and extreme Christian predestinationism.

The problem becomes even worse in scientific naturalism. All activities reduce to necessity—whether in Marxism’s dialectic materialism, contemporary neurobiology, or behavioural psychology. A human being is reduced to one’s DNA of evolutionary survival and to variations of social conditioning. The concept of *person* is merely a ghost in the machine. Neither religious nor secular fatalism yields a meaningful place for the individual.

At the opposite pole, that of diversity, all existence is composed of particulars with no ultimate unifying Being or *telos*. Such religions picture humanity coping within a chaos of cosmic flux or a myriad of forces and spirits. In western atheism, ‘We make ourselves.’ ‘I am the centre of the universe.’ The spirit of the Enlightenment is that ‘Without God I am free!’

But what is freedom with no referent beyond oneself? I might be *free*. But in an empty universe such freedom would be like floating in outer space with neither spacecraft nor planet in sight and only two hours of oxygen before I die. Freedom itself is meaningless. From Kandinsky and Dadaism to Basquiat, Cy Twombly, and Cindy Sherman, twentieth-century art reveals the angst of being one’s own god in a meaningless universe.

Outside of biblical Christianity, there is no structure that finally satisfies the tension between the one and the many. As three persons in one God, the Trinity incorporates both unity and diversity within itself. Apart from direct revelation, explains Cornelius Van Til, we could never know that God exists tripersonally. But that being revealed, we surely can understand ‘that the unity and the plurality of this world has [in] back of it a God in whom unity and the plurality are equally ultimate’.<sup>10</sup> Creation reflects this unity-diversity from the immensity of outer space with its at least two hundred billion galaxies, to the complexity of inner space with sub-atomic quarks, leptons, and bosons. Whether vastly expansive or fathomlessly small, there is order between individual components and the total scheme of creation.

In the end, as often expressed, if there is no infinite, absolute point of reference in the universe, then all of the particulars are meaningless. What is more, if such a point of reference is to give real significance to all existence, it must be a personal Absolute, a ‘Thou’. In contrast with all other religions and philosophies, the concept of the Holy Trinity presents a meaningful relationship between the one and the many in the universe. Every thing and every person has real significance because they were created by and exist related to the triune God. Even if a person does not believe in God, in fact, his or her existence is of immense value because God has created them for himself.

<sup>10</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar (2d ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007), 364-65.

### IV The Trinity and the Beginning of Personal Creation

Besides space, time and matter, the triune God chose to create other *persons*. By creating self-conscious beings God limited himself again. No longer was God the only moral and spiritual agent in existence. Unlike God himself, all created beings are finite, whether in heaven or on earth. In contrast to God the Son, for example, Satan is not capable of being present in all places at all times; rather he extends his kingdom through his minions. In creating finite persons, the God of the Bible remains infinite but he is no longer morally and volitionally all-inclusive; now a personal being could choose against him.

Contrary to the atheist and the pantheist, the Judeo-Christian affirms that human personhood and dignity is grounded in the *imago Dei*. While more ample than these aspects, *personhood* surely includes the simple elements of thought, volition, and emotion: (1) God thinks and reasons in a logical manner, although not necessarily in the same thought patterns that we use; (2) God chooses voluntarily and possesses freedom of will; and (3) God manifests a multiplicity of affections—all as a moral, purposeful Being.

Just as Scripture establishes that each member of the Godhead reasons, exercises volition, and manifests a plurality of feelings, so we as finite persons evince similar characteristics. Other aspects of the divine image appear to include creativity, aesthetic appreciation, moral conscience, aptitude for dominion, a sense of immortality, and the desire and capacity for I-thou relationships.



Therefore, although human beings have fallen into sin and suffer the defects of the fall, the *imago Dei* is not disfigured beyond recognition. We are truly persons with eternal value because the Creator and Absolute of the universe is also personal. And God has come to us in Jesus Christ, the express image and manifestation of God.

In sum, Trinitarianism argues that neither atheism nor pantheism has a sufficient framework for explaining our humanness—the full-bodied ‘humanity’ presumed worldwide through literature, music, and common life. Nor does Islam teach that human beings are created in the image of God; rather it says we are creatures made to serve but not to fellowship with Allah.

In Christianity, the doctrine of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the structure and ontological grounding for the realities of our own personhood: our self-consciousness, rationality (including language), self-determinative choices, plethora of affections and emotions, sense of afterlife, moral sensibilities of right and wrong, capacity for dominion over the earth, and our desire for relationships with God and with other human beings. Of course the infinite God transcends our realities, therefore our parallels must be understood by analogy. Yet in Trinitarian faith, our humanity has found its home.

## V The Trinity and Humanity in Community

The doctrine of the Trinity yields further light for the individual in social relationships. From eternity past, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit unite in communication, fellowship, and love, thus in a plenitude of interpersonal

relationships.<sup>11</sup> In the secular world, many declare that human relationships exist only to serve our selfish interests, that ‘love’ is simply the product of biological hormones, and that language is a tool of manipulation. No longer are such attitudes merely oriented to the North Atlantic. From Beijing to Buenos Aires many find life without significance. The words of Bob Dylan bemoan the hopelessness of a tired, adult humanity, ‘I used to care, but things have changed.’<sup>12</sup>

In the midst of anti-humanitarian affirmations, the Christian faith proclaims that communication, friendship, and love—all central human desires—assume profound meaning when we understand that humankind was created by a Godhead that manifests social relations within itself. From conception and birth, to language and cultural formation, to values acquisition, to our physical daily wellbeing (if not survival), we are dependent upon social relations.

We are created for community. Whereas God as Trinity is self-sufficient, we are not. Created as individuals, we are made, so to speak, for a trinity of relationships—with self, other human beings, and the Lord God. As creatures rather than Creator, we are not designed to presume ourselves all-knowing, to attain ultimate perspective, or to be in the centre of our

<sup>11</sup> For biblical evidence, see Horrell, ‘The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity’, *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology*, ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler, (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007), 44–79.

<sup>12</sup> Bob Dylan, from the song “Things Have Changed”, *Modern Times*, Sony, 2006.

universe. A person is designed to trust in and to enter into fellowship with the triune God.

If the one God is three persons in relationship and if I am created to reflect or *image* my Maker, then I have every reason to enter into full human relations: to work with others for the good of all; to engage in reasoned thought and communication; to enjoy objective study of science, history, and other disciplines of learning; to create and participate within the visual arts and music; to express emotions of joy, sadness, and anger in my personal associations; to pursue and develop friendships in healthy, appropriate ways; to value social connections around the births, marriages, anniversaries, and deaths of others; to delight in sexual intimacy in marriage (which reflects the covenantal nature of God’s own unity, hence to be guarded as sacred); to be zealous for justice and compassion among those laden by poverty, oppression, hardship, and sin; to care for our earth over which we remain vice-regents.

This is not to deny a fallen world with the surd that separates and destroys believers and unbelievers alike. Rather it is to say that as Christians we have a structure for being persons-in-relation in the world and, all the more, in the context of the believing community, the church.

Thus the Christian faith leads us to the depths of our humanity. Made in God’s likeness, now forgiven and reborn, the more we become like Jesus Christ (the perfect *imago Dei*) the more we reflect the wondrous personal glory of God. True Christianity does not erase the person, nor is it careless toward community—in contrast to many

forms of pantheism and atheism. On the contrary, biblical faith leads the Christian to full personhood in relationship with others. No human being in all of history compares to Jesus of Nazareth in his purity, magnetism, and profound relations with others. That which we see in the humanity of the Last Adam corresponds to the ontology of every human being, an ontology that is awakened and renewed through faith in the Saviour.

## VI. The Trinity and Love, Justice, and Forgiveness

Two central characteristics of the God of the Bible are justice and love. Beginning with the latter, love is beautifully manifest in the relationship between the Father and the Son (Jn. 17:23–24), and further in God’s sacrificial love for the world (1 Jn. 4:7–10). Defined in 1 Corinthians 13, *agape* is not directed inwardly but outwardly in the sharing and giving of oneself to others. In contrast to Islam, Judaism, and other religions that insist God exists exclusively as one person, the triune God of Christianity is not egocentric, solitary, or isolated.

Richard of St. Victor wrote,

It is never said of anyone that he possesses charity because of the exclusively personal love that he has for himself—for there to be charity, there must be a love that is directed towards another. Consequently where there is an absence of a plurality of persons, there cannot be charity.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Richard of St. Victor, *De Trinitate*, 1.20.

Richard further argued that the delight of shared love, as supreme happiness, involves not just two persons but three. The tripersonal God does not need to create something or someone to love. God is love in its resplendent fullness apart from creation. Yet he invites created persons into the divine fellowship through faith in the Son.

As Jesus Christ revealed God to the world, so he taught us to follow him by way of the cross (Lk. 9:23-25). By the giving of ourselves in love to others we are transformed into godlikeness, the *imago Dei*. A fundamental principle for being human is that the more we strive to give of ourselves, first to God and then to others, the more fulfilled we are as personal beings.

In sacrificially loving others, we imitate the persons of the Trinity—the Father as he gives ‘all things’ to the Son (Jn. 16:15; 17:10), the Son as he obeys the Father (Jn. 5:30; 8:29; Phil. 2:8) and when having conquered all he gives ‘all things’ back to the Father (1 Cor. 15:27-28), and the Spirit as he selflessly glorifies the Son and the Father (Jn. 16:13-15).

This divine self-givingness within God’s personal plurality serves as our model, first in our response to God himself, but secondarily in our social relationships whether in the family, local church, or at any other sociological level.

Just as God is love, so he is holy and just. The only attribute thrice repeated in both Testaments is the trisagion, the seraphs’ cry of ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord [God] Almighty’ (Is. 6:3; cf. Rev. 4:8). Some thirty times in Isaiah alone God is the ‘Holy One’, he who is other, mysterious, and perfect. Jesus is called the same in the New Testament (Mk.

1:24; Jn. 6:69; Rev. 3:7). One aspect of God’s holiness is his justice. God is the absolute moral standard of all existence; all right and wrong are directly related to his moral purity and role as the Holy One and Judge.

How can God’s holy justice coexist with God’s love if sin should enter the world? If God were unipersonal he could be perfectly just and holy, but he would be equally unable to forgive sin without violating his own justice. In Islam’s Hadith (the sayings of Muhammad), Allah stands above the bridge that passes from this earthly life to the afterlife of paradise. Underneath this bridge ‘as narrow as the edge of a sword’ is the burning abyss of hell.<sup>14</sup> Every Muslim admits that he is not morally perfect as Allah is perfect; he can only cast himself on divine mercy.

But in Islam there can be no certainty of God’s mercy. Allah does whatever he chooses. All Muslims believe God forgives, but the question is how? A person who lives a life ninety percent good and ten percent evil might be granted paradise. A person with less virtue might be pushed into the abyss. But no one knows what Allah will do. The point is this: assuming that no one is perfect as God is perfect, Allah must compromise his justice in order to forgive so that some enter Paradise. Yet if Allah compromises his justice he is no longer the Moral Absolute of the universe.

Conversely, the New Testament declares that God is both the Just and Justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:23-26). In that ‘all have

<sup>14</sup> Sura 19:68-71, ‘The Bridge Sirat’, from which the Hadith analogy is developed.

sinned and fall short of the glory of God’, neither works of the law nor acts of righteousness remove our judgment. Rather, precisely because God is more than one person, this God can both demand absolute justice and he himself pay the price that he requires. Because of the plurality of persons, the triune God can be the Holy Judge, the sacrificial Lamb who satisfies divine justice, and the sanctifying Spirit who works within me (even when a sinner) to lead me to God and to make me his child. Because the God of the Bible is Trinity, he is ‘big’ enough to be both perfectly just and perfectly forgiving to all who trust in the Son.

## VII. The Trinity and Time and Space

In forming a transcultural Trinitarian worldview, the most speculative realm is that of God in relation to time and space. Yet certain tentative observations can be set forth that reflect historical Christian thought.

Unlike the cyclical concept of time in classical pantheism and some forms of animism, the biblical perspective of time is linear: the history of the world has beginning, direction, and culmination. For this reason, more than any other religion, Judeo-Christianity has large numbers of predictive prophecies—by one well-known estimate over a quarter of the Bible.<sup>15</sup> The Christian faith takes objective history seriously as demonstrated in the incarnation,

ministry, death, resurrection, and second coming of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-27). God enters creational time and space dynamically relating with human beings. Simultaneously this same sovereign God is transcendent, existing outside and beyond his creation.

Seen from a biblical viewpoint, time and creation have a beginning but they have no end. The physical order was created and will continue in *some form* forever, although the nature of time and space may be radically transformed. Such fundamental categories of existence belong to the covenant that the triune God has made with finite beings. Believers are given ‘eternal life’—a life filled with the plenitude of the Lord, a life of elevated quality, finally with ‘spiritual bodies’ (1 Cor. 15:44)—but always within some form of time and space whether heavenly or earthly (Rev. 22:2), as these seem essential to the existence of finite beings.

Furthermore, in Christian tradition God the Son has forever assumed a human nature (body and soul, Jn. 1:14), although that in no way confines his deity. The Holy Spirit, likewise, is manifested as a dove and tongues of fire. If not merely metaphorical, some language of Scripture suggests that even God the Father appears in finite forms within the orders of creation (*i.e.*, the Ancient of Days, Dan. 7:9-10). Indeed, certain concepts of heaven include some kind of appearance of the Father (‘him who sits on the throne’, Rev. 4:9,10) while mainline theological understandings affirm him as exclusively immortal, invisible, ‘whom no one has seen or can see’ (1 Tim. 6:15).

However conceived, by God’s entering the world—principally in the Incar-

<sup>15</sup> J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and Their Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), 681, puts the figure at 27 percent.

nation of the Son and by the ever-active Spirit—we can understand and relate to God in tangible ways. Indeed, if the infinite God did *not* reveal himself in words and appearances analogous to human reality, then we would be without categories to understand and relate to him. Whenever God reveals himself it is by grace and condescension.

From this vantage, the triune God reveals himself through finite forms without limiting himself to those forms. He is simultaneously inside and outside creation, not bound to but active within the created orders. In this way, the Trinity's presence encompasses both creation and non-creation, preserving divine transcendent autonomy (termed the *immanent* Trinity) together with the Godhead's functional working within creation (the *economic* Trinity).

People often think in two dimensions: heaven and earth. But it may be better to conceive of reality in at least three spheres in respect to God: (1) our universe and the world in which the triune God has shown himself, most properly in the Incarnation; (2) the celestial dimension of angels where saints too will have glorified bodies before the eternal God-man Jesus Christ and in the presence of the Father; and (3) the transcendent, immanent Trinity, beyond all dimensions and ultimately all comprehension.

### Conclusion: The Trinity, Glory, and Christendom Today

In view of the infinite, personal nature of the Most High God as revealed in the Bible with absolute perfection, self-sufficiency, unchangeableness, and free will, and in view of the Trini-

tarian structure of the universe which gives meaning to human beings as persons—with rationality, morality, love, balance between unity and diversity, and so very much more—something yet needs to be said. Nearly everything mentioned until now is related to *our* worldview, our human perspective. However, having begun with the Trinity before creation, we pause to realize that everything that is not creation is God.

If the tripersonal God existed as the all-inclusive One before creation, then surrounding creation (and sustaining creation) resides the infinite triune Lord, the Lord of all, exercising his magnificent character. For those who are Christians, redeemed by the work of Christ at the cross, finite creation constitutes an enormous 'crib' over which and around which the triune God hovers, affectionately caring for his own. All creation will someday recognize the greatness and beauty of God, together with the unfathomable debt it owes to the Almighty for its existence and preservation, and for the provision of salvation in Christ Jesus.

It is likely that this overwhelming understanding of our utter indebtedness to God is our main role as created personal beings. In glorifying the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we are fulfilled as finite persons in the eternal plan of God. Nonetheless, there is no more blessed glory than that glory given by each member of the Trinity to the other, each wholly comprehending and exalting the greatness of the other.

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325) and its theological development at Constantinople (381) established the confessional centre of Christian faith. We began our overview with

a warning to respect divine mystery, reminding ourselves that there is much we do not know and much more about which we have only opinions, given the ambiguity of biblical and historical evidence. Yet the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed frames the boundaries of what is licit versus what must not be said.

Within this confession we should welcome new cultural constructions of Trinitarian doctrine as believers worldwide seek to articulate more deeply the Christian doctrine of God and its meaning for their lives and cultures. Surely some of the miss-steps that yet plague wider expressions of Christendom will reoccur (and these must be deemed in error). Yet as Christianity's masses increasingly and overwhelmingly weigh the scales to the global South, believers with non-western languages and thought forms should endeavour to articulate Trinitarian doctrine and to work out its implications for how they should live in the midst of their own changing milieus.

The purpose of this article has been to offer a tentative framework for a transcultural Trinitarian worldview. The biblical-theological superstructure suggested here can help unify varying contextualized expressions of Christian faith around Trinitarian con-

fession. Of course, the international reader will rightly complain that the author's perspective is largely western and North Atlantic. For this reason believers in different cultures need one another—to challenge, enlarge, deepen, and balance varying perspectives. But the suggestion, humbly submitted, is especially for a missional Trinitarian worldview—not missional as from one culture to another, but missional as each body of believers seeks to engage and express Trinitarian faith within its own culture.

Believers are to live out the faith they profess. And so, in the plurality and beauty of the body of Christ worldwide, may the understanding of the triune God continue to unfold in fresh insights and intentional application—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. John of Damascus lends an eloquent doxology: 'O Father! O coequal Son! O coeternal Spirit! In Persons Three, in Substance One, and One in power and merit; in Thee baptiz'd, we Thee adore for ever and for evermore!'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> John of Damascus, 'Canon for Easter Day, called the Queen of Canons', Ode VIII. 'Thou hallowed chosen morn of praise', in *Hymns of the Eastern Church*, ed. and trans., J. M. Neale, 3rd ed. (London: J. T. Hayes, 1870), 106.