

**Trinitarian Intelligibility:
An Analysis of Contemporary Discussions**

**An Investigation of Western Academic Trinitarian Theology
of the Late Twentieth Century**

by

Jennifer Anne Herrick

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JENNIFER ANNE HERRICK

PHD 2006

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

ABSTRACT

**Trinitarian Intelligibility: An Analysis of Contemporary Discussions
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of the Late Twentieth Century**

The concern of this thesis is with the history of ideas; specifically, the history of recent theological ideas. This thesis is not a work of systematic theology but rather situates discourse about a theological problem within the matrix of some relevant contemporary thought. Its category then is the history of the development of ideas.

In the late twentieth century many academic theologians found the intelligibility of the traditional language used about the Christian Trinitarian God to be problematic. This is the thesis' research problem. The research hypothesis is that these recent academic theologians sought to make trinitarian language used about the Christian Trinitarian God intelligible by replacing static definitions of 'person' with a dynamic relational model. The methodology of this thesis is essentially historical and hermeneutical. It draws on the hermeneutical philosophy of language of Paul Ricoeur as it developed around two key notions, his notion of text and his attention to the metaphorical process. Data is drawn from representative recent trinitarian works of a significant and scholarly nature written in and for the western arena at the end of the twentieth century. These sources are evaluated according to their ability, in Ricoeur's language, to redescribe the reality of the trinitarian symbol and refigure the world of contemporary Christian consciousness.

The thesis presents an investigation of western academic trinitarian theology in terms of a structure of analysis and synthesis. Via an exploration of a series of responses made by these recent trinitarian theologians to categories of thought pertaining to the concept of person and their consequent theological appropriations, this thesis demonstrates the research hypothesis. It demonstrates that in recent trinitarian thought postmodern ideas on person as relational fuse with supportive biblical and derived patristic thought as theologians seek to make intelligible language used about the Christian Trinitarian God. In particular, the ancient concept of perichoresis is found by theologians to provide the necessary point of intersection. With a redefinition of person relationally, and in particular perichoretically, the Christian God is understood in communal terms.

Renewed understanding of God as communal is a chief outcome of the use of the relational perichoretic model of person by theologians as they address their concern with trinitarian intelligibility. The thesis demonstrates that when theologians redefine person in relational terms and particularly in perichoretic terms, a redescription of the trinitarian symbol and a refiguration of Christian consciousness of trinitarian reality is seen to be possible. Such a refigured consciousness constitutes an active reorganisation of Christian being-in-the-world. The implications of this reorganisation form the stuff of future trinitarian research and provide the motivation for this thesis' research.

PREFACE

An Academic Journey

This thesis comes out of an academic and personal journey. The journey began initially with a focus on the discipline of human geography (studied at Macquarie University and the University of New England which including writing a thesis in social geography). The journey and focus then took a theological turn. Studies at the Catholic Institute of Sydney and the Sydney College of Divinity included writing a thesis in systematic theology; for this the writer was awarded the Dr Beth Blackall Prize for Best Dissertation, 1998. That thesis has since been published and the book launched at the Australian Catholic University National in 2004. The journey now focuses on the history of ideas. This thesis then is an historical study of ideas, specifically an investigation of western academic trinitarian theology of the late twentieth century. It was begun at Charles Sturt University and completed at the University of Sydney. This work has provided the basis for two conference papers given by the writer during the thesis' formation; one at the 5th Association for Pacific Rim Universities Doctoral Students Conference at the University of Sydney in 2004 and the other at the Australian Association for the Study of Religions Conference hosted by the University of Sydney in 2005.

STATEMENT OF THESIS INTENT

This thesis is not a work of systematic theology. Rather, its concern is with the history of ideas; specifically, the history of recent theological ideas. This historical study has emerged from prior theological study. The writer's prior thesis investigated the compatibility of the Christian doctrinal immutable God with the biblical God of Love. Out of this work evolved an interest in the history of trinitarian theological ideas which were emerging at the end of last century. The writer's interest in this area began initially with a concern for underlying factors and emerging patterns which she saw to be evident in late twentieth century cross denominational trinitarian thought. As this thesis underwent reshaping and refining (with a change of university), the writer clarified her focus. It became that of an investigation of western academic trinitarian theology of the late twentieth century with an analysis of contemporary discussions. Specifically, the writer noted that in the late twentieth century many academic theologians found the intelligibility of language used about the Christian trinitarian God to be problematic. This then became the thesis' research problem. From her investigation the writer has come to propose that the theologians investigated addressed this problem by seeking redefinitions within the trinitarian language. Specifically, the thesis proposes that recent academic theologians have sought to make traditional language used about the Christian trinitarian God intelligible by replacing static definitions of the concept of person with a dynamic relational model. This is the thesis' research hypothesis. The thesis investigates, then, how recent academic theologians have handled the problematic issue of intelligibility of language about the three personed God. Without entering the theological debate itself the thesis examines the issues for, responses of, appropriations by, and outcomes for, these theologians. The thesis is not necessarily faith based but offers rather an interpretation of the way a cross-range of recent representatives of the academic western Christian theological tradition have attempted to deal with and discuss the issue of trinitarian intelligibility. The thesis thereby offers an historical insight into, and interpretation of, the theological arena of recent western trinitarian discussion.

A NOTE ON THE TERMS POSTMODERNISM AND POSTMODERNITY

“In the *Zeitgeist* of postmodernity, there can only be postmodernisms.”¹ So wrote Graham Ward towards the close of the twentieth century, in 1997. What is the difference between postmodernism and postmodernity? On this there is some dispute. While the concepts of postmodernism and postmodernity are not necessarily raised in lengthy or detailed or explicit fashion by the theologians examined in this thesis, it is worthwhile to set the scene here in the preface of other discussion of these concepts which is available and may make clearer (or not!) the setting of the works of the trinitarian theologians discussed in this thesis.

In 2001 Ward continued to maintain a distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity. For him “postmodernism is both an aesthetic and a critical moment within the ideology of the modern.... [where] new emphases and sensibilities are making themselves felt and older ways of looking at and explaining the significance of the world are becoming otiose or no longer credible.”² For him “postmodernity now becomes an epochal term describing a culture in which postmodernism is seen as the dominating worldview.”³ He allows for the interchangeability of the terms at that point when and where the critical position becomes culturally dominant.⁴

Just what postmodernism is and just when postmodernity occurs remain unclear, yet to be determined at this flux of time. For Alister McGrath “postmodernism is a vague and ill-defined notion, which perhaps could be described as the general intellectual outlook arising after the collapse of modernism.”⁵ Rather than being a moment in the ideology of the modern, for McGrath, postmodernism follows its collapse. Yet Ward counters this understanding, drawing on Jean-François Lyotard, who “makes the point that to see the modern being superseded by the postmodern would itself be a modern conception, allied as the modern is to notions of linear development and the new.”⁶

Importantly, Ward refers to how Lyotard “relates the ‘post’ ... to a going beyond the modern in a way which is also a return to what was forgotten in the establishment of the modern.”⁷ Indeed Kevin Hart affirms that “the postmodern allows us to recover much of the premodern.”⁸ In proposing a deep continuity between premodernity and postmodernity, Hart draws upon John Milbank for whom the premodern can be

¹ Graham Ward, “Postmodern Theology” in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford, 2d ed. (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997), 586.

² Graham Ward, “Introduction: ‘Where We Stand’” in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001), xiv.

³ Ward, “Introduction, ‘Where We Stand,’” xxii.

⁴ “I would allow that the two applications of ‘postmodern’ (philosophical and aesthetic) and the sociological notion of postmodernity do become interchangeable at the point where the postmodern critical position *vis-à-vis* the project of modernity comes to dominate and eclipse the cultural conditions within which modernity lived and breathed.” Graham Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997), xxiv-xxv.

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998), 244.

⁶ Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxv. See Jean-François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” In *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 50, cited in Ward, “Introduction,” xxv, n. 32.

⁷ Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxv.

⁸ Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oneworld: Oxford), 2004, 112.

inserted into postmodern thought.⁹ This ability to insert the premodern into postmodern thought is precisely what will be demonstrated in this thesis with respect to contemporary trinitarian discussions occurring in the West at the close of the twentieth century.

To understand how postmodern thought has impacted on theology, the view offered by David Tracy is useful. “Postmodernity at its best is a fully ethical response to the ambiguities of modernity. Postmodern thought at its best is an ethics of resistance – resistance, ... to more of the same, of the modern turn to the subject.”¹⁰ This resistance to the modern turn to the subject features strongly in trinitarian discussions examined in this thesis. As Tracy notes “the famous ‘turn to the subject’ of modernity can now be seen as both emancipatory and entrapping.”¹¹ This has applied to trinitarian theology as much as to any other discipline.

Recent trinitarian theologians have found the influence this “turn to the subject” has had on contemporary understanding of the language used about the Christian God to be quite problematic. The context of this problematic is situated well by David Ford. Ford notes how “postmodern thinkers ... argue that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of human subjectivity, reason, and knowledge have broken down beyond retrieval. Kant is often seen as representing ... what has to be rejected: an autonomous, self-consciously knowing and acting human ‘subject’; an ideal of knowledge and rationality which includes certainty, representation of reality, universality, comprehensiveness and practical imperatives; and an ultimate foundation in the ‘unconditional’ of God. Instead ... the postmodern human subject is seen as ‘decentered’ ... shaped essentially through particular social relations, language, and culture.”¹² This thesis demonstrates that this shift in perception underlies the work of recent trinitarian theologians as they work hard with the analogical language they inherit to give intelligibility to the trinitarian symbol of the Christian God.

Tracy perceives and recent trinitarian theologians reveal that “beyond the early modern turn to the purely autonomous, self-grounding subject, beyond even the more recent turn to language (the first great contemporary challenge to modern subjectivism)¹³ lies the quintessential turn of postmodernity itself - the turn to the other. It is that turn, above all, that defines the intellectual as well as the ethical meaning of postmodernity. The other and the different come forward now as central intellectual categories across all the major disciplines, including theology.”¹⁴ That this is so is central to discussions in western trinitarian theology at the end of the twentieth century, as they respond to postmodernity’s “leading general features. ... the

⁹ Hart, *Postmodernism*, 146.

¹⁰ David Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” in *Readings in Modern Theology*, ed. Robin Gill (Abingdon: Nashville, 1995), 228.

¹¹ Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 225.

¹² David F. Ford, “Epilogue: Postmodernism and Postscript,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, vol 2, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1989), 291-92.

¹³ “In terms of the structural linguistics developed initially by Ferdinand de Saussure, and subsequently by Roman Jakobson and others, the recognition of the *arbitrariness* of the linguistic sign and its interdependence with other signs marks the end of the possibility of fixed, absolute meanings.” Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology*: 244.

¹⁴ Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 229.

precommitment to relativism or pluralism in relation to questions of truth.”¹⁵ Indeed as Tracy suggests, “God’s shattering otherness, the neighbour’s irreducible otherness, the othering reality of ‘revelation’ ... come now in new postmodern *and* post-neo-orthodox forms to demand the serious attention of all thoughtful theologians.”¹⁶ For Ward “these theologians also recognize that postmodernism does not delineate an epoch at the end of modernism, ... Rather, postmodernism is a moment within modernism; the moment modernism pushes into the margins and represses in order to construct ... postmodernism ... marks the return of the repressed. It is the repressed “other” of modernism.”¹⁷

A NOTE ON THE PLACE OF THEOLOGY IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

What this means for theology is that it has become freed “to engage deeply with the specificity of Christianity ... the status given to texts ... and the recognition of their pervasive, formative influence.”¹⁸ It is demonstrated in this thesis how scriptural and patristic texts are returned to by recent trinitarian theologians as they wrestle with the intelligibility issue of trinitarian language in contemporary times. This process has come about, as Ward recognises, because “the postmodern has fostered post-secular thinking – thinking about the other, alternative worlds. In the postmodern cultural climate, the theological voice can once more be heard.... In such a reorganisation of space, time, and bodies, theology can engage with postmodern debates.”¹⁹

Specifically, in these debates, as this thesis shows, “theologians ... tend to employ the insights and analyses of postmodern thought to reread foundational texts and, with reference to the Scripture, liturgies, and creeds, construct new Christian theologies in, through, and at the margins of postmodernism.”²⁰ It is the case, as Ward recognises, that “these theologians locate themselves in the place of faith, and the Christian tradition prior to the secondary, postmodern reflections upon that tradition which their work explores. Rather than interpreting poststructuralism or deconstruction as the final nail in theology’s coffin, the work of these theologians opens up the theological horizons within postmodern thought itself.”²¹ This thesis shows how “particular theological ... horizons are opened up by this postmodern thinking.... the self as divided, multiple, or even abyssal, and therefore never self-enclosed but always open onto that which transcends its own self-understanding (rather than simply being an agent and a *cogito*).”²² Ward sums up very well the place of theology in this postmodern world. “Rather than postmodernism summoning theology to its judgment seat, we can explore the limits of the philosophical and the limits of explanatory

¹⁵ McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 244.

¹⁶ Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 229.

¹⁷ Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” 587.

¹⁸ Ford, “Epilogue: Postmodernism and Postscript,” 294.

¹⁹ Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxii.

²⁰ Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” 586-87. Kevin Hart points out that these theologies [and this certainly is pertinent to the trinitarian theologies coming out of the end of last century] “would not be a wholly new interpretation of Christianity,... Yet there can be original theologies, movements that seek to recreate Christianity by returning to the wellsprings of the faith.” Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oneworld: Oxford), 2004.

²¹ Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” 586-87. Elsewhere in this chapter Ward also notes that “postmodern theologies ... are indebted ... to poststructural and deconstructive philosophies as they issued out of existential phenomenology.”(p593).

²² Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” 588.

narratives to which postmodernism draws attention. Theology then summons postmodernism to declare its own theological character. In fact, the theological horizons beyond philosophy (which postmodernism opens up) can be read as the theological fissuring and refiguring of the human, the mundane and the metaphysical which it has consistently been the task of theology to investigate.²³ It is in this climate that the works of the trinitarian theologians examined and discussed in this thesis have flourished as “postmodern insights and approaches are employed within theological discussions concerning ontology and analogy.”²⁴

Drawing all this together, there is a belief among these trinitarian theologians, as discerned by Hart and affirmed by the discussions attended to in this thesis, that “only a Trinitarian theology will overcome the finite, static world bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment, and that theology leads us ineluctably to a participatory ontology, the outlines of which were first drawn by Christian Neoplatonists.”²⁵ Indeed it is the view of many that “theology should be assuming a robust cultural role.”²⁶ The discussions examined in this thesis certainly affirm Ward’s observation that “the postmodern God is emphatically the God of love, and the economy of love is kenotic. ... In specific Christian communities ... the operation of this love provides a redescription of the Trinitarian God and the economy of salvation. Postmodernism, read theologically, ... defines the space within which the divine demands to be taken into account.”²⁷

A NOTE ON POSTMODERN THINKING ON PHILOSOPHY AS IT PERTAINS TO THEOLOGY

The redescription of the Trinitarian God referred to above has come about as part of a philosophical process belonging to postmodern thinking. Ward is alert to “two tasks that postmodern philosophical thinking undertakes. First is the overcoming of metaphysics as conceived in modernity as the correlation of Being and reasoning.....Second is the thinking of difference – that which is repressed in order that the modern might be constituted as the new, the novel.”²⁸ In reference firstly to the second task mentioned, it is pertinent to the idea that the postmodern God is the God of love, discussion of which becomes the final focus of this thesis, that postmodern thought attends to the concept of difference. Hart argues (his argument is in reference to Derrida)²⁹, as do the theologians discussed in this thesis, “that the doctrine of the Trinity is based on differences between the three divine personæ. ... A difference is at the heart of the Christian God, and without that difference we cannot understand the deity as love.”³⁰

Due attention now needs to be given to the first task mentioned, as it helps contextualize an understanding of analogy, something taken pretty much for granted in discussions that emerged at the end of last century on trinitarian intelligibility.

²³ Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” 592.

²⁴ Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” 595.

²⁵ Hart, *Postmodernism*, 112.

²⁶ Hart, *Postmodernism*, 112.

²⁷ Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” 598

²⁸ Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxvi.

²⁹ Hart discusses how for Derrida, God is always to be thought in terms of undivided self-presence and the concept is to be undone by reference to difference or more precisely *différance*. Hart, *Postmodernism*, 114.

³⁰ Hart, *Postmodernism*, 114-118.

Metaphysics as the rational science of Being, in which being is composed of individual bodies existing in ontological relationship with each other, was given influential expression by Francisco Suárez in his *Disputationes metaphysicae* (1597).³¹ As background to the focus of this thesis, it needs to be recognized that this work on the analogy of being, the great Chain of Being - in which God is conceived as the most real, the cause, end, and summation of Being - gave rise to the struggles of Descartes.³² Indeed, “it was Suárez who prepared the way for Descartes and Kant by teaching that being is a concept that can be grasped by reason.”³³ Postmodern commentators see that metaphysics, as such, makes possible the projects of modernity, founded upon the autonomy of human reason.³⁴ It is with the overthrow of such metaphysics - which is also the overthrow of secularity - that the project of postmodernism, Ward argues, is announced.³⁵ Yet, as Hart points out, and here the complexity for understanding the theological use of analogy resides, throughout the ages the Thomist school has fiercely disagreed with the Franciscan teacher Johannes Duns Scotus and his legacy “and insisted that there is no universal idea of being, only an analogy of being between God and his creatures.”³⁶ Interestingly, it is here that the two postmodern concerns raised by Ward can be seen to collide. He explains that the conception of ‘analogy’ in Aquinas deals with similarity in difference as a means whereby God-talk avoids the pitfalls of univocity, resulting in anthropomorphism, and equivocity, resulting in agnosticism. The analogy of being as Suárez conceives it allows all predicates to participate in a third thing (Being) which they all share. In the latter idea ‘analogy’ has erased difference to exalt similarity. What this means is that the ontological difference between the uncreated God and the created order, which Aquinas saw as fundamental, has disappeared.³⁷ With this background a short discussion of analogy, metaphor and symbol is in order.

A NOTE ON THE USE OF ANALOGY IN THEOLOGY

The issues of ontology and analogy have been integral to the investigations of recent trinitarian theologians as they endeavoured to discern how best to make intelligible the language of “three persons in one nature” to denote the Christian God. Yet, just as the concepts of postmodernism and postmodernity are not raised in a detailed or explicit manner by these theologians neither is the notion of analogy versus metaphor. In fact the overlap in the postmodern era of the ideas of analogy, metaphor and symbol are visible and the words are used variously by contemporary theologians, as will be shown below. While all recent theologians would acknowledge the traditional analogical nature of the language used for the Trinity, it is nevertheless the very product of postmodernity that some theologians are more ready than others to use this language also in terms metaphorical and / or symbolic. In reflecting accurately the

³¹ Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxiv. However it was Duns Scotus (1265-1309) who determined a universal idea of being that could be predicated of both the finite and the infinite, humans and God. Hart, *Postmodernism*, 134.

³² Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxiv.

³³ Hart, *Postmodernism*, 134.

³⁴ Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxiv. For Ward “here lies the origins of the onto-theology which Martin Heidegger, in the twentieth century, will see as receiving its final formulation in the work of Hegel: the onto-theology, the metaphysics, which Heidegger sought to overthrow.” Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxiv.

³⁵ Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxiv.

³⁶ Hart, *Postmodernism*, 134.

³⁷ Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xlv, n. 26.

discussion of these theologians this thesis has endeavoured to be faithful to how individual theologians have handled the issue of trinitarian intelligibility. Having said that, the thesis does, though, understand the historical process it pays witness to in terms of Ricoeur's notion of text and metaphorical process. This is discussed at some length in the methodology section of the Prologue.

Suffice to note here that there is overlap, and even a certain circularity, in the definitions of analogy, metaphor and symbol as can be seen in their current dictionary definitions.³⁸ This overlap needs to be set against the background of the traditional understanding of analogy for theologians in the West as "a method of predication whereby concepts derived from a familiar object are made applicable to a relatively unknown object in virtue of some similarity between the two otherwise dissimilar objects (called analogues)."³⁹ As has been already noted, the employment of analogy enables the theologian and philosopher to avoid the Scylla of 'anthropomorphism' and the Charybdis of 'symbolism'.⁴⁰ As theologians develop their theologies in postmodernity, it should be noted that those in the tradition of Aquinas and Cajetan, who employ this method of analogy, regard the errors by the 'symbolists'⁴¹ as less grievous than those of the 'anthropomorphists'.⁴²

That the accepted tradition, which sees language used of the Trinity strictly in analogous terms, is no longer clear cut is exemplified by Elizabeth Johnson. On the language of the Trinity Johnson speaks of how "this symbol has been imprisoned in misunderstandings."⁴³ Fleshing this out she elsewhere highlights how "person refers to God only indirectly, metaphorically."⁴⁴ Preceding this statement is her reminder that "with the analogical nature of theological language firmly in view it must be said that God is not a person in the modern sense nor is God three such persons."⁴⁵ She concludes that "the point that guides this discussion is that we do not have hold of a clear and distinct idea when speaking about God as a Trinity of persons."⁴⁶ With this statement the thesis begins its exploration of recent trinitarian discussion centered on the issue of trinitarian intelligibility in the West at the end of the twentieth century.

³⁸ *Macquarie Dictionary Definitions: Symbol*: something used or regarded as standing for or representing something else; the meeting point of many analogies; *Analogy*: an agreement, likeness, or correspondence between the relations of things to one other; a partial similarity in particular circumstances on which a comparison may be based; *Similarity*: a point of resemblance. *Metaphor*: a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable, in order to suggest a resemblance; *Resemblance*: similarity, a degree, kind or point of likeness. A certain circularity is clear.

³⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross, 2d ed., rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 48.

⁴⁰ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 48.

⁴¹ *Macquarie Dictionary Definition. Symbolist*: a writer who seeks to express or suggest ideas by emphasizing the symbolic value of language as a means of communicating otherwise inexpressible experiences of reality, as by the use of words to convey a meaning.

⁴² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 48.

⁴³ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (NY: Crossroad, 1993), 305. Johnson writes extensively on this in *She Who Is*, chap 10, "Freeing the Symbol from Literalness," 197ff.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 203.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 203.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 203.

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STYLE GUIDE

The thesis follows throughout:

A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations by Kate L. Turabian, sixth edition, revised by John Grossman and Alice Bennett (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

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PROLOGUE

RESEARCH PROBLEM

IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

MANY ACADEMIC THEOLOGIAN HAVE FOUND

THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF THE TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE USED

ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN TRINITARIAN GOD

TO BE PROBLEMATIC

INTRODUCTION

“Bernard Lonergan used to comment wryly on the theology of the Trinity ‘The Trinity is a matter of five notions or properties, four relations, three persons, two processions, one substance or nature, and no understanding.’”⁴⁷ Such wryness reveals the brief of Western academic trinitarianism as the twentieth century approached closure.

The matter is put more simply by Douglas Ottati: “More than a few people regard trinitarian doctrine as the quintessential statement of Christian nonsense: 1+1+1=1.”⁴⁸

Indeed, Elizabeth Johnson pronounces that “in the West, it [the triune symbol] has been neglected, literalized, treated like a curiosity, or analyzed with conceptual acrobatics entirely inappropriate to its meaning. Consequently, the doctrine has become unintelligible and religiously irrelevant on a wide scale.”⁴⁹ The brief of recent trinitarianism is this perceived unintelligibility, with a view to ameliorating its associated perceived irrelevance.

⁴⁷ Gerald O’Collins, “The Holy Trinity: The State of the Questions,” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2. Cited also by Elizabeth Johnson in “Let the Symbol Sing Again,” *Theology Today* 54, no. 3 (1997), 299. This quip is based on an unwritten verbal jocular reversal by Lonergan, based on the lack of understanding of that taught by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* Part One on One God Q. 3 a. 7, two processions Q. 27, aa.3.5, three Persons Q. 30, a.2, four relations Q. 39, five notions Q. 41. Lonergan is criticising not Aquinas but the state of pre-1949 theological texts written on the subject with “little understanding” of Aquinas. Thus deplors Lonergan, “Its simplicity, its profundity, and its brilliance have long been obscured by interpreters unaware of the relevant psychological facts and unequal to the task of handling merely linguistic problems.” Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum, Word and Idea in Aquinas*, ed. David B. Burrell (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1967) xiv, n. 11.

⁴⁸ Douglas Ottati, “Being Trinitarian: The Shape of Saving Faith,” *The Christian Century* 112, no. 32 (1995) : 1044.

⁴⁹ Johnson, “To Let the Symbol Sing Again,” 299.

The research problem of this thesis is that many academic theologians of the late twentieth century have found the intelligibility of language used to express belief in the Christian God, that is, trinitarian language, to be problematic. It is a problem which concerns philosophers of religion and theologians alike.⁵⁰ The problem is located particularly within the contemporary theological arena of postmodern Western Christianity (Christian traditions which are the inheritance of the Latin tradition) of the last two decades of the twentieth century.⁵¹ This theological arena is of interest to the writer, constituting as it does, the writer's general background. Specifically, for the purposes of this thesis, the contemporary arena is considered as the postmodern Western and Western influenced societies and persons, ecclesial and also secular. The trinitarian intelligibility problem is particularly pertinent to the Euro-American / Australian scene yet includes, potentially, not only where the 'Latin' Western tradition of Christianity has predominated or is predominating but also where it is spreading. This spread is caught up in a globalisation and westernisation of the world carrying with it a cultural, religious and linguistic colonisation.⁵² In this contemporary

⁵⁰ As Catherine Mowry LaCugna notes, "Theologians can only be pleased that philosophers of religion have been paying attention more recently to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity... the philosophers want to pursue ... the intelligibility and coherence of the Trinity. Theologians stand to learn from philosophical exploration of this area which historically has generated so many difficult linguistic and philosophical quandaries. At the same time, the existing philosophical literature suggests that philosophers might profit from hearing a theological perspective on the doctrine of the Trinity." Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity," *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (1986) : 169. It is this theological perspective that receives attention by this thesis.

⁵¹ The problem has come to the fore as the theological arena of recent postmodern Western tradition Christianity has come to be informed by non-theological categories of thought. As LaCugna remarks, "The ultimate aim of a systematic theology is not analytical but constructive.... There is always the challenge to advance new ways of thinking and speaking about God." LaCugna, "Philosophers and Theologians," 178.

⁵² Alister McGrath points out that the spread of the Latin Western tradition of Christianity belongs to a religious colonisation which finds its origin in the fact that systematic theology generally has been developed in a Western context. On top of this, much Western theology of the modern period, he suggests, was based upon the flawed assumption of the universality of the modes of Western thought and discourse. However, as McGrath notes, with the advent of postmodernity this theological imperialism has waned. See discussion in Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 140-142. Nevertheless, a linguistic colonisation has also occurred in conjunction with and reinforcing this religious colonisation. "English is rapidly becoming the preferred language of the global Christian community." McGrath, *Future of Christianity*, 27. McGrath notes how this has not happened for specifically religious reasons. It reflects the more general rise of English as the common language of the world of business and scholarship. He adds an important qualifier, though, in the link between religion and language. "It has ... been of no small importance that the two leading English-speaking nations have shown a strong commitment to Christian mission and education." *Future of Christianity*, 91. In an interesting historical twist in this process, Europe has become the conspicuous exception to one of the most remarkable phenomena of the 1990's - the surge in interest in spirituality which has led many sociologists to speak of the 'desecularisation' of the world. See G. Davie, "Europe: The Exception That Proves the Rule," in *The Desecularisation of the World*, ed. Peter Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 65-83. Miroslav Volf is aware "of the seismic changes shaping self-understanding of Christian communities around the globe. While Euro-American established and "mainstream" denominations appear puzzled and foundering, the "free churches" on multiple continents are flourishing." John W. Stewart, "The Shape of the Church: Congregational and Trinitarian," *Christian Century* 115, no. 16 (1998) : 541. See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age, ed. Alan G. Padgett, inaugural vol. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 11ff. Arguably, puzzlement and foundering on the part of established Western traditions stems from a loss of intelligibility of the traditional language used to express that which is central to Christianity, that God is Triune. Yet, interestingly, many of the free churches that show growth seem yet to show concern with such problems.

arena, the language of the doctrine of the Trinity, traditionally expressed as “three persons in one nature or substance,” has been found to have experienced a loss of intelligibility.⁵³ This loss of intelligibility has to do with the categories of thought traditionally used to express the Christian symbol of God, the Trinity.

Categories of thought which underpin Western trinitarian thought include those of Greek metaphysical, German idealist subjective, and modern individualist. When these categories are applied trinitarianly in postmodern times, they have been found to be no longer adequate for trinitarian intelligibility. For example, the concept of person being thought of in terms of substance, subject, or an individual, respectively, is no longer helpful for trinitarian intelligibility. The reason these previous categories are no longer helpful or adequate is to do with a broader shift in categories of thought which has occurred in recent times. Postmodern thinking operates more in personalist and relationist categorical terms. For reasons that will become apparent in the course of this thesis, using previous categories of trinitarian thought in postmodern times leads inevitably to dangers of either tritheistic or modalistic interpretation in trinitarian thinking. Both endanger true trinitarian linguistic intelligibility. Both endanger that which distinguishes Christianity theologically. Herein lies the importance of trinitarian intelligibility and the need for it to be addressed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM OF TRINITARIAN INTELLIGIBILITY

That the language of the Christian trinitarian doctrine is not contemporaneously intelligible in the arena as described, nor the God that it defines, is supported by a significant number of trinitarian authors, writing in and/or for the Western world in the last twenty years of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ The intelligibility challenge revolves around the question: Is the God of Christians a Christian God? The answer, that the trinitarian mystery “is a theological theorem without practical incidence,”⁵⁵ looms as a widespread conviction. The bottom line is that the triune symbol, and the thought to which it gives rise, is seen as being unintelligible and religiously irrelevant on a vast scale. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson: “The Trinity continues to be found in the appendix of the personal catechism of many minds and hearts.”⁵⁶ Walter Kasper acknowledges that this situation “poses a powerful challenge to theologians.”⁵⁷ This is

⁵³ McGrath warns that this loss of intelligibility is not to be understood in the sense in which “there has always been a maverick trend in Christian thought which identifies unintelligibility with sophistication.... so much writing on Christian theology in recent years appears to have cultivated unintelligibility as the supreme virtue.” *Future of Christianity*, 96-97.

⁵⁴ Reminding us that “doctrines are ... human formulations meant to shed light on religious experience” LaCugna explains that “doctrinal formulations normally employ abstract or explanatory language ... ; they are ‘second level’ discourse.” LaCugna, “Philosophers and Theologians,” 175.

⁵⁵ Bruno Forte, *The Trinity as History: Saga of the Christian God*, trans. Paul Rotondi (New York: Alba, 1989), 3.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 192.

⁵⁷ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (London: SCM, 1984), 263. (Original publication: *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (Matthias Grünewald Verlag: Munich, 1982). Relevant to this confrontation to theologians, are the ideas of “the Italian cultural theoretician Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who developed one of the most penetrating accounts of the role of the intellectual in modern Western culture, in order to explore possible means for achieving a degree of reconciliation between the theologian and the believer, the academy and the church, the intellectual and popular

so with an associated decline in both teaching and learning about the centerpiece to Christianity. The importance of overcoming this decline lies in the face of Christians losing a sense of their identity, and Christians and non-Christians alike losing a sense of what it is that distinguishes Christianity theologically. Both losses lead to a general loss of recognition of the uniqueness of Christianity. With a loss of uniqueness comes a loss of perceived relevance.

The challenge of relevance of the Trinity has been taken up in Western trinitarian writings over the last two decades of the twentieth century. The aim of these writings is to shift the concept of the Trinity from the 'appendix' to the central body of Christian teaching and belief. This is desired because of the perceived need to contextualise Christianity in a religiously pluralistic postmodern age. Such contextualising necessitates trinitarian language being intelligible, both to Christians and non-Christians alike. The importance of this is clear when it is understood that the importance of trinitarianism is in asserting the distinctiveness of Christianity in the face of general pluralism.

Jürgen Moltmann is a leading trinitarian theologian who decries any attempt to adhere to general pluralism and is representative of the view that "dialogue with other religions is not helped if Christians relativize that which is distinctively Christian."⁵⁸ The British Council of Churches' 1989 Study Commission on the Trinity takes up this issue and confronts the argument that Moltmann refutes, that Christian trinitarian belief presents an obstacle to conversation with members of other religious communities and thus there is expedience in reducing emphasis on this aspect of Christian belief.⁵⁹ The Council's resounding response is that Christians "seek to find in trinitarian doctrine ... the foundation for the unity of humankind."⁶⁰ Supporting this response, Joseph Bracken speaks of "the enduring value of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in an age of increasing scepticism about the possibility of objective truth not only in theology but in any other area of public life."⁶¹ Clearly then, in a pluralist

Christian culture." McGrath, *Future of Christianity*, 129. Edward Oakes makes an interesting comment that the shift in the role of the theologian has had a profound effect on theology. For in the ancient church most theologians were bishops, in the Middle Ages, monks, and in modern times, professors. This shift saw a correlative shift from conciliar statement to prayer to specialisation and technicality. Thus today one of the great challenges is that theology "becomes accessible to non-professionals." Edward Oakes, review of *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Gavin, ed. and *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *America* 167, no. 12 (1992) : 306.

⁵⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1991), xi. *In der Geschichte des dreieinigen Gottes. Beiträge zur trinitarischen Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1991, 11). Moltmann refers here to J. Hick and P. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

⁵⁹ British Council of Churches, Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today, *The Forgotten Trinity, The Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today* (London: British Council of Churches, 1989), 1 : 5. The council asks accordingly and poignantly, if this approach, of such as Moltmann's, is the correct one. "The question remains of whether the doctrine is simply a given to be taken account of and, where necessary modified as the result of conversations with others; or whether it has positive implications for the way in which the task of conversation is to be approached." British Council of Churches, *Forgotten Trinity*, 1 : 40.

⁶⁰ British Council of Churches, *Forgotten Trinity*, 1 : 40.

⁶¹ Joseph Bracken, review of *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed. *Theology Today* 54, no. 3 (1997) : 400. Indeed Bracken highlights that "the doctrine of the Trinity, with its dual emphasis on oneness and threeness as equally ultimate,

Western society, if the Christian faith is to assert that which is unique to itself, and argue its relevance, an argument it makes in terms both soteriological and anthropological, it must demonstrate this in clear, intelligible, language. It is recognised that Christians need to attend first to their own intra-dialogue before engaging meaningfully in inter-religious dialogue. As Thomas Marsh emphasises “it cannot be a matter of indifference, then, how this understanding is in practice perceived and presented.”⁶² This thesis examines recent trinitarian understanding as has been perceived and presented by theologians striving for increased intelligibility. Existent internal inconsistencies and unintelligibilities are addressed so that Western Christians can understand better the import of their central tenet and meaningful dialogue thus can occur with other religions.

Intelligibility is needed for a range of addressees in this defined contemporary arena including: the Christian who seeks to understand the defining trinitarian concept of his or her faith and its relevance to his or her life, Christian scholars and other persons of faith who seek to offer Christianity’s uniqueness and relevance to a pluralist world, and the pluralist world as it seeks what Christianity has to offer. In order to face and discuss the problem of trinitarian intelligibility, a contextualising of the recent state of lack of trinitarian intelligibility is required.

CONTEXTUALISING THE PROBLEM OF TRINITARIAN INTELLIGIBILITY

The loss of trinitarian intelligibility in the contemporary Western arena is understood to occur against a background and in a climate of current divorce between the Christian East and West. It occurs, too, in the context of a series of historical theological separations that have occurred particularly in the West. These separations in part account for, and in part compound, the loss of intelligibility. Contemporary trinitarian authors recognise three separations of: confession and doctrine, God’s unity and God’s trinity, economic and immanent Trinity. These separations are further discussed in Appendix One which supplements this following sub-section. The appendix is entitled “Contextualising the Problem of Trinitarian Intelligibility.”⁶³

These separations have arisen out of the difficult nature of traditional systems of theo-philosophical thought. It is not surprising that a search for a new theological system and category of thought more conducive and more intelligible to the contemporary mind is emerging. As John Thompson highlights, “Feminists, liberationists, process thinkers ... Catholic and Protestant theologians, as well as Eastern Orthodox, [writing for the Western Christian world] desire to free the Trinity from its isolation in traditional statements with the consequent lack of relation to practical Christian faith

contains unexpected and hitherto unexplored resources for dealing with the problems, and possibilities, of contemporary pluralism. Indeed, it may be ... that the Trinity provides the only ontological ground for a harmonious reconciliation rather than a violent repression of the plurality that so marks our age.” Bracken, review of *Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, 400.

⁶² Thomas Marsh, *The Triune God: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Study* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-third Publications, 1994), 163.

⁶³ See Appendix 1, “Contextualising the Intelligibility Problem,” which details the historical theological development, as currently understood, of the division between East and West and the three major theological separations which have occurred in the West, as they pertain to the intelligibility issue.

and life.”⁶⁴ How has this isolation, particularly in the West, come about? Its roots lie in the divorce that has occurred between the West and East of Christendom.

Separation of East and West

When speaking of the Trinity “the badge of orthodoxy in the East was one ‘ousia’, three ‘hypostases’.”⁶⁵ John Thompson brings home the conceptual ramifications for trinitarian intelligibility of the divorce which occurred between East and West. In the Latin West this became one essence or substance, ‘*substantia*’, in three persons, ‘*personae*’. In form the theologies of East and West were one but the East had at its disposal a more subtle Greek language that was more dynamic and nuanced. The West used a more static, less flexible language. “When to this was added both a different starting point - in the East with the persons and in the West with the unity - and a varied use of the terminology adopted, it indicated a somewhat different emphasis and understanding of the way the doctrine was to be interpreted and applied.”⁶⁶ This different emphasis and understanding has come to be epitomized in the thought developed respectively from that of the Cappadocians and from Augustine.

Against this background can be understood the recent “strong critique from a number of Western theologians of their Augustinian heritage and the growing acceptance of the importance of the Cappadocian approach.”⁶⁷ This critique takes account of Aquinas’ development of Augustine’s so called “psychological analogy,” and it is noted with regret that the interpersonal approach of the so-called “social analogy” developed in the East from the Cappadocians therefore declined in influence in Western trinitarian theology. Reinforcing this John Gresham notes that despite “a later shift away from the Augustinian-Thomistic model,⁶⁸ ... theology [in the West has] retained its unipersonal image of the trinitarian God.”⁶⁹ It is this unipersonal image

⁶⁴ Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

⁶⁵ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1977), 254.

⁶⁶ Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, 125-26. At this point is noted a comment concerning the traditional interpretation of the divorce between East and West offered by Lewis Ayres. Ayres points out that the ‘West’ and ‘East’ are traditionally taken to represent two opposed camps. Yet the upheavals in scholarship on the fourth and fifth centuries, of the past few decades, means that most modern theologians’ accounts of these theologies are no longer accepted by specialists in the field. Further, Ayres claims that the almost complete lack of detailed histories of trinitarian theology during the medieval period and since the Reformation make wide-ranging judgements simply impossible. Thus it is Ayres’ view that we do not know enough to keep offering the ‘East’/ ‘West’ opposition with clarity and certainty. Lewis Ayres, review of *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity*, by Thomas Weinandy, *Journal of Theological Studies* 50, no. 1 (1999) : 430. Nevertheless the so-called divorce between East / West remains relevant to this thesis for understanding the problem of trinitarian intelligibility in the West since it is current general theological perspective.

⁶⁷ Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, 126. David Coffey, for instance, calls into question the “psychological analogy” of Western trinitarian thinking as *theology* (he considers it “an illustration”) because of its lack of biblical warrant and its methodologically inappropriate starting point. David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas: The Doctrine of the Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

⁶⁸ William Loewe indicates the nature of this shift. “The traditional Augustinian – Thomist synthesis is ceding place or at least finding a complement in theologies which recognise the revelatory as well as redemptive character of the paschal mystery.” William P. Loewe, review of *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery: A Development in Recent Roman Catholic Theology*, by Anne Hunt, *Theological Studies* 59, no. 3 (1998) : 554.

⁶⁹ John L. Gresham, “The Social Model of the Trinity and Its Critics,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46, no. 3 (1993) : 325.

developed in the West which is seen by many to carry trinitarian intelligibility problems. The issue is highlighted by Colin Gunton. Speaking from a biblical perspective, he finds that the distinctive ‘personae’ of Father, Son and Spirit in the being of the one God falls short of adequate identification when God is considered unipersonally, God’s personhood being located in God’s oneness and not God’s threeness.⁷⁰ This confuses the intelligibility of “three person in one nature.” The ramifications of the divorce between East and West and the ensuing trinitarian developments in the West are directly connected with contemporary trinitarian intelligibility problems. Taking cognizance of these historical developments is required if the intelligibility issue is to be squarely faced.

Separation of Confession and Doctrine

The heart of the problem is discerned by Christopher Hall. In developing its doctrine “the church produced a language and grammar that moves beyond the Bible’s specific boundaries as Christians sought to worship and understand the complex God the gospel revealed.”⁷¹ David Cunningham fleshes out the consequences of this conceptual move. Trinitarian doctrine came to find its ground not so much in experience but in philosophy, Greek philosophy. He contends that trinitarian doctrinal neglect set in as a consequence of this shift away from the biblical narratives.⁷² The neglect arose because theological concepts and language became increasingly technical and involved, for many unintelligible and thus irrelevant to their Christian lives. As a result, although it was widely assumed that Christians ought to learn that God is Trinity, at some point in the West this lost its centrality. Notes Cunningham, by the late eighteenth century theological accounts of the Christian faith were written with little reference to the trinitarian doctrine.⁷³ While neglect of the teaching, understanding and discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity came to clear expression in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the neglect, confirms Elizabeth Johnson, had been building long before.⁷⁴ Yet, throughout Christian history, *practices* continued to be trinitarian. This split between confession and doctrine indicates a gradual loss of actual intelligibility. With this split in the West between functional confession and philosophical doctrine came the roots of a loss of trinitarian intelligibility which developed further as two doctrinal separations ensued; the conceptual separation of God’s unity and trinity and the conceptual

⁷⁰ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 4.

⁷¹ Christopher Hall, “Adding up the Trinity,” review of *Knowing the Name of God*, by Roderick T. Leupp; *The Triune God*, by Thomas Marsh, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, by John Thompson, *Our Triune God*, by Peter Toon, and others, *Christianity Today* 41, no. 5 (1997) : 27.

⁷² Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology, ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 22. Supporting Cunningham’s contention, Susan Thistlethwaite is mindful that what is now taken to be orthodox trinitarian language and theology has come out of original contact with the Greco-Roman world and its basic presuppositions. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “On the Trinity,” *Interpretation* 45, no. 2 (1991) : 163.

⁷³ Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, iix. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) wrote in *Conflict of the Faculties*: “The doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, has no practical relevance at all, even if we think we understand it; and it is even more clearly irrelevant if we realize that it transcends all our concepts. Whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the Deity makes no difference.” *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1996, 264; and a little later F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) wrote in *The Christian Faith*: “Our faith in Christ and our living fellowship with him would be the same even if we had no knowledge of any such transcendent fact (the Trinity) and even if the fact itself were different.” Trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 741.

⁷⁴ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 192.

separation of God as Trinity viewed in terms economic and immanent. These doctrinal separations have compounded trinitarian intelligibility.

Separation of God as One and God as Three

Pursuant to the separation of confession and doctrine, Western theological tradition has split the trinitarian doctrine of God into two parts, further compounding trinitarian intelligibility. It is something commented on by most recent Western theologians. Leonardo Boff gives an account of this split in terms of Judaic and Greek monotheistic inheritance in the face of prevailing polytheism, to explain why most Western theological accounts of the Trinity have started from the idea of One God to arrive at the notion of the Triune God.⁷⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg examines the history of this split. It began in the pre-Nicene era, was cemented with the period of High Scholasticism, and continued by Reformation dogmatics.⁷⁶ This history is commented on by Elizabeth Johnson. It “was finessed by the rational spirit of the Enlightenment, which produced ... classical theism.”⁷⁷ The basic problem with separating discussion of *De Deo Uno* from *De Deo Trino* is that it has given rise to a widespread feeling that the former is prior and fundamental, the latter but a late emergence at a lower level of symbolization. Christoph Schwöbel points to Eastern Orthodoxy’s very criticism of this aspect of Western trinitarianism, a “marginalisation of the Trinity in Western theological thought.”⁷⁸ Marginalisation invites a sense of a lack of credibility. Intelligibility requires some level of credibility. The danger of this marginalisation of God as Trinity has become apparent. Criticism of this split approach with recognition of its consequences has appeared with such a great as John Henry Newman warning about abandoning “belief in “God as Three” in favour of the oneness of God in the manner of the Unitarians.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Boff explains that the Christian inheritance of the Greek notion of the One Supreme Being coupled with the Judaic affirmation of Yahweh as the one and only true and living God has given Christianity a pre- and / or an a-trinitarian monotheistic hold that has been hard to shake. Boff recognises that the early years of Christianity’s apologetic and pastoral pressures called for a “monotheistic approach in the face of the prevailing polytheism” but the upshot of this has been a weakening of the “Christian understanding of the originality of a triune God.” Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns, Liberation and Theology, ed. Leonardo Boff et al., vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates and Search, 1988), 16-18. *A Trindade, A Sociedade E A Libertação* (Petrópolis, RJ, Brazil: Editora Vozes for CESEP, São Paulo, 1986).

⁷⁶ See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 1 : 288-291, for details. *Systematische Theologie*, band 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988). For Pannenberg, the pinnacle of this long historical development was in Aquinas who “gave the structure of the doctrine of God its classical form... Basic to this structure is the derivation of the trinity of persons from the concept of the unity of substance.” *Systematic Theology*, 1 : 288.

⁷⁷ Johnson, “To Let the Symbol,” 299.

⁷⁸ Christoph Schwöbel, introduction: The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems and Tasks, to *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T & T Clark for Research Institute in Systematic Theology King’s College, London, 1995), 5.

⁷⁹ Newman warns that this would be met by a counter revival of the “Manichean dualism (‘God as Two’ so to speak,” as happened in the early 20th century “with Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophical Movement) which would . . .soon bring to birth an outright atheism – ‘God as None.’” Edward T. Oakes, review of *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, by David Cunningham, *Theological Studies* 59, no. 3 (1998) : 529. Oakes refers to this as “this Newmanian declension from Three to One to Two to None.”

Recent Western critiques of this split approach examine the assumption that *De Deo Uno* is prior and fundamental. Jürgen Moltmann recognises the problem in terms of substance. That substance has been seen as primary to person, in his view, has had considerable consequence for Western theology and for Western thinking in general. For Moltmann, it leads to the disintegration of the doctrine of the Trinity into abstract monotheism.⁸⁰ In line with this, Catherine LaCugna contends that “after Kant, Feuerbach, and the philosophical revolution of the Enlightenment, the idea of an ‘in itself’ is to be viewed as a philosophical impossibility, and this especially if God is the subject.”⁸¹ Out of critiques of this tradition in the West of separating God’s oneness and threeness comes the challenge for trinitarian intelligibility. The challenge is to express intelligibly the recognition that, as Wolfhart Pannenberg makes plain, “The trinity is compatible with the unity and even that the thought of the unity is not relevant or consistent apart from the trinity.”⁸² How to make this intelligible is the rub.

Yet one further theological separation needs acknowledgment; the separation of God as economic Trinity and God as immanent Trinity. This separation has further compounded trinitarian intelligibility.

Separation of the Economic Trinity and the Immanent Trinity

As unitarian formulations about God became increasingly remote from the specifically Christian trinitarian language of God and from its confessional base, a further separation, beginning in the Patristic Period, occurred. This separation was that of separating the concept of the immanent Trinity (God in Godself) from the concept of the economic Trinity (God for Us).⁸³ LaCugna is one who is particularly strident in her condemnation of this separation which she feels was reinforced in the Latin West by Augustine’s pursuit of a ‘psychological’ analogy for the intratrinitarian relations.⁸⁴ The problem of the resultant disjuncture for trinitarian intelligibility is highlighted by Robert Jenson. If propositions about the immanent Trinity become detached from the biblical triune narrative, then Christians are left with “formulas without meaning.”⁸⁵ In support, Schwöbel pierces to the heart of the matter. “If these two aspects of trinitarian discourse are separated it follows that the immanent Trinity and the question of the immanent relations in the Godhead become a matter of speculative theology, whereas the economic Trinity is placed in the

⁸⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1981), 17. *Trinität und Reich Gottes* (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1980), 32-33.

⁸¹ LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, Harper Collins, 1991; New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1stpbk, 1993), 168.

⁸² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1 : 291.

⁸³ LaCugna refers to this separation as separating *theologia* (God in Godself) from *oikonomia* (God For Us). This, she says, led finally to a deductive or descending order as the normal procedure for theology: God in GodSelf and then God for Us. LaCugna, *God For Us*, 43-44. As with starting with the One God, such a procedure is seen to compound trinitarian intelligibility by reversing the order of knowledge (revelation) of the trinitarian God. See Carl Braaten, “The Problem of God Language Today,” in *Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-talk Today*, ed. Carl Braaten (MN: Fortress, 1989), 16.

⁸⁴ LaCugna believes that “Augustine’s pursuit of a ‘psychological’ analogy for the intratrinitarian relations would mean that trinitarian doctrine thereafter would be concerned with relations ‘internal’ to the godhead, disjoined from what we know of God through Christ in the Spirit.” LaCugna, *God For Us*, 44.

⁸⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113.

context of the history of salvation.”⁸⁶ Such a separation provides two trinities with two different functions. This certainly lacks intelligibility! The biblical link is crucial as the foundation of Christian conceptualising over against Greek philosophising. Otherwise the result, as LaCugna colourfully puts it, becomes one of an unintelligible image of “a ‘heavenly committee’ of persons arranged nonlinearly (as in the triangle) or linearly (as in a vertical row).”⁸⁷ Indeed the essence of Karl Rahner’s renowned axiom is a definitive response to this separation. Rahner affirms: “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.” “*Die ökonomische Trinität ist die immanente Trinität und umgekehrt.*”⁸⁸ This twentieth century axiom of Rahner’s laid the groundwork for recent trinitarian response to these difficult separations which have developed in the West.

Response to Theological Separations in Western Trinitarianism

In the wake of the kinds of Western trinitarian conceptualising and ensuing theological separations such as have been discussed above, David Coffey offers a personal reflection on the dropping of trinitarian studies as recently as the 1960s in the West. He affirms that the problem indeed lay in the tract on the Trinity being separated from that on the One God with an accompanying focus on the immanent Trinity. He notes, though, that this trend is being reversed. The crucial importance of the Trinity for Christian identity and soteriological understanding is coming to be more fully recognised and appreciated.⁸⁹ It is such recognition that drives the desire to make the Trinity intelligible to the contemporary arena.

The British Council of Churches offers a note of caution here that within this drive, the experiential dimension of Western theology since Schleiermacher has led to the opposing contention that “while we may ... experience a threeness of God in life or worship, such experience does not license traditional speculation about the *being* of God.”⁹⁰ [italics added] Colin Gunton speaks out against such an approach believing it can destroy rather than ensure the relevance of trinitarian categories.⁹¹ The real challenge thrown up by this history of division and separation for trinitarian intelligibility is recognised by Elizabeth Johnson. The challenge is in the need to

⁸⁶ That this is of great theological concern is further explained by Schwöbel. “If discourse about the immanent Trinity and discourse about the economic Trinity are not shown to be constitutively related the history of salvation becomes largely irrelevant for the conception of the triune being of God in its immanent relations, and the trinitarian constitution of God’s being becomes irrelevant for the history of salvation.” Schwöbel, Introduction: The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology, 6. God is rent asunder and trinitarian intelligibility vanishes.

⁸⁷ LaCugna, “Practical Trinity,” *The Christian Century* 109, no. 22 (1992), 680. In comparison, she points out that “we less frequently connect the idea of “Trinity” with the vision of the author of Ephesians: God’s open and dynamic life of giving and receiving in which humanity graciously has been included as partner.” “Practical Trinity,” 680-81.

⁸⁸ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder; London: Burns & Oates, 1970), 22. *Mysterium Salutis, Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, ed. Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer, vol 2. *Die Heilsgeschichte vor Christus*, chapter 5, “Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendeter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte,” (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967), 328.

⁸⁹ Coffey reflects on what is behind the reversal of this trend. “We cannot understand salvation, spirituality, Christian living in the world without understanding at least something of the Trinity.” Coffey, *Deus Trinitas*, 3-4.

⁹⁰ British Council of Churches, *Forgotten Trinity*, 1 : 4.

⁹¹ Gunton contends that such an approach is a matter of “over-simplification” stemming from trying to be concretely relevant. He points to both Ted Peters and Catherine LaCugna who he believes have advocated limiting enquiry only to the economic Trinity. He sees their work as reinforcing tendencies in the work of Robert Jenson. *Promise*, xvii-xix.