1+1+1=1: Making Sense of Nonsense: The Concept of the Trinity at the End of the 20th Century

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Introduction

Bernard Lonergan has commented wryly of trinitarian theology that 'The Trinity is a matter of five notions or properties, four relations, three persons, two processions, one substance or nature, and no understanding'.[1] This quip is aimed at Thomas Aquinas, who in Part One of the *Summa Theologica* spoke of the One God in terms of two processions, three persons, four relations and five notions. Douglas Ottati has similarly commented: 'More than a few people regard trinitarian doctrine as the quintessential statement of Christian nonsense: 1+1+1=1'.[2] Elizabeth Johnson agrees, arguing that in the West the triune symbol has been neglected, literalised and treated as a curiosity. She observes that the doctrine has become unintelligible and religiously irrelevant on a wide scale.[3]

At the end of the twentieth century, the problem for trinitarianism was to overcome this general perception of unintelligibility and irrelevance. The problem has concerned philosophers of religion and theologians alike. The late Catherine Mowry LaCugna has noted that philosophers have long pursued the question of the intelligibility and coherence of the Trinity and that theologians stand to learn from the philosophical exploration. At the same time, philosophers might profit from hearing a theological perspective.[4] Over the past decade or so, many academic theologians have come to find the traditional language used of the Christian trinitarian God to be problematic. This

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[1] Gerald O'Collins, 'The Holy Trinity: The State of the Questions' in Stephen T Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins (eds) *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (Oxford, 1999) 2.
[2] Douglas Ottati, 'Being Trinitarian: The Shape of Saving Faith', *The Christian Century* 112:32, 1995, 1044.
[3] Elizabeth Johnson, 'Let the Symbol Sing Again', *Theology Today* 54:3, 1997, 299.
[4] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 'Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity', *Modern Theology* 2:3, 1986, 169.

paper highlights the issues that have arisen around this concept and the efforts that have been made in recent postmodern thought to present it in more intelligible terms.

In late twentieth century thought, the problem of the intelligibility of trinitarianism has been raised particularly within the contemporary theological arena of postmodern Western Christianity, particularly in the Euro-American and Australian scene. But it is also a problem that relates to the spread of the Latin Western tradition of Christianity. This spread remains an aspect of the globalisation and westernisation of the world, which involves forms of cultural, religious and linguistic colonisation. Alister McGrath has pointed out that the spread of the Latin Western tradition of Christianity is a religious colonisation enabled by the fact that systematic theology has generally been developed in a Western context. This religious colonisation is reinforced by a linguistic one, English being the preferred language of the global Christian community, just as in the world of business and scholarship.[5] Of the link between religion and language, McGrath comments that it is 'of no small importance that the two leading English-speaking nations have shown a strong commitment to Christian mission and education'.[6]

Miroslav Volf observes a significant aspect of this process: 'while established and "mainstream" denominations appear to be puzzled and foundering, the "free churches" on many continents are flourishing'.[7] These difficulties on the part of established Western traditions have stemmed in part from a loss of intelligibility of the traditional language used to express that which is central to Christianity: that God is triune. The free churches are yet to show a concern for such problems. This loss of intelligibility has to do with the categories of thought used to conceptualise the Trinity, which include the legacy of Greek metaphysical, German idealist and modern individualist philosophies. These are no longer considered

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[5] Alister E McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford, 2002) 27.
[6] *Ibid*, 91.
[7] John W Stewart, 'The Shape of the Church: Congregational and Trinitarian', *Christian Century* 115:16, 1998, 541. See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity*, ed Alan G Padgett (Grand Rapids, 1998) 11ff.

adequate to the task – in particular, the concept of person, understood in terms of substance, subject or individual, respectively. Postmodern philosophers have highlighted the dangers of both tritheistic or modalistic interpretation in trinitarian thought, which not only endanger the intelligibility of the concept, but endanger that which distinguishes Christianity theologically. In response, postmodernist theologians have begun to develop more personalist and relationist philosophical schema for its understanding.

The Importance of the Problem of Intelligibility

A significant number of Christian authors, writing in the last twenty years or so, have suggested that the language of Christian trinitarian doctrine is unintelligible in the contemporary world. Walter Kasper acknowledges that this situation 'poses a powerful challenge to theologians'.[8] But one might note, with Edward Oakes, a shift in the role of the theologian in this debate. In the early church most theologians were bishops, in the Middle Ages, monks, and in modern times, professors. This shift reflects a correlated shift from conciliar statement to prayer to specialisation and technicality. The effect of this is that today, theology 'becomes accessible to non-professionals'.[9]

The importance of this, as Johnson notes, is that the Trinity 'continues to be found in the appendix of the personal catechism of many minds and hearts'.[10] Over the last decades, the aim of much trinitarian writing has been to shift this concept from the appendix to the central body of Christian teaching and belief. This strategy is a function of a perceived need to contextualise Christianity in a religiously pluralistic, postmodern age. Jürgen Moltmann is representative of the view that 'dialogue with other religions is not

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[8] Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans Matthew J O'Connell (London, 1984) 263.

[9] Edward Oakes, Review of Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P Gavin (eds) *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, *America* 167:12, 1992, 306.

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

helped if Christians relativize that which is distinctively Christian'.[11] Joseph Bracken has spoken of the continued value of the 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'.[12] Indeed Bracken has highlighted that 'the doctrine of the Trinity, with its dual emphasis on oneness and threeness as equally ultimate, contains unexpected and hitherto unexplored resources for dealing with the problems, and possibilities, of contemporary pluralism'.[13] In a pluralist Western society, if the Christian faith is to assert that it is unique and relevant, both anthropologically and soteriologically, it must do so in clear, intelligible, language.

It is arguable, then, that Christians need first to attend to their own intra-religious dialogue before engaging meaningfully in inter-religious dialogue. Thomas Marsh emphasises that 'it cannot be a matter of indifference, then, how this understanding is in practice perceived and presented'.[14] Theological inconsistencies and unintelligibilities need to be addressed so that Western Christians can better understand the central tenets of their religion and meaningful dialogue can occur with other religions. The importance of this is that the question of how God is viewed is related to that of how humanity views itself. It is a two-way street, as Johnson remarks: the way a community shapes its language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good, the profoundest truth. This language in turn shapes the identity and praxis of the community.[15]

The doctrine of the Trinity has both reflected and dictated how Christians view not merely God but also themselves and others.

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[11] Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, trans John Bowden (London, 1991) xi. Moltmann refers here to J Hick and P Knitter (eds) *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*: *Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, 1987).
[12] Joseph Bracken, Review of Kevin J Vanhoozer (ed) *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, *Theology Today* 54:3, 1997, 400.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] Thomas Marsh, *The Triune God: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Study* (Mystic, 1994) 163.
[15] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 3-4.

LaCugna emphasises that 'the central theme of all trinitarian theology is relationship'.[16] To the extent that Christians have taken seriously the 'three in one', their view of society, both secular and religious, has been communitarian. By contrast, to the extent that Christians have rested with pre-trinitarian or non-trinitarian monotheism, then hierarchical and patriarchal views of society and church have ensued. The question of the Trinity affects not only their view of themselves but their view of, and dialogue with, others. Trinitarian thought has far-reaching practical import. This explains Johnson's enthusiasm for the concept: 'For too long, this symbol has been imprisoned in misunderstandings. It is time to set it free to sing again'.[17]

Contextualising the Problem of Trinitarianism

The loss of intelligibility of trinitarian thought in the West has occurred against the background of the divorce of the Christian East and West. There are a series of theological divisions that have particularly influenced thought on the Trinity in the West.

i. The separation of East and West

In speaking of the Trinity, the badge of orthodoxy in the East is: one '*ousia*', three '*hypostases*'.[18] In the Latin West the badge became: one essence or substance, '*substantia*', in three persons, '*personae*'. John Thompson points out that, while the form of the theologies of East and West were one, the East had at its disposal a subtler, more dynamic and more nuanced language in Greek. In its discussion of the Trinity, the language of the West was more static, less flexible. Added to this were different starting points: the East started with the persons and the West, with the unity. The result was variations in use of the terminology adopted to speak of the Trinity.[19] The thought of

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[16] LaCugna, 'Practical Trinity', *The Christian Century* 109:22, 1992, 679.

[17] Johnson, 'To Let the Symbol', 305.

[18] J N D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London, 1977) 254.

[19] Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York and Oxford, 1994) 125-26.

the Cappadocians came to express a trinitarian understanding and emphasis different from that of Augustine.

ii. *The separation of confession and doctrine*

Christopher Hall recounts that, as the Church developed, it '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'.[20] The consequences of this for trinitarian doctrine is that it came to be grounded not so much in experience but in philosophy: Greek philosophy. David Cunningham contends that the state of trinitarian thought is a direct consequence of this shift away from the biblical narratives.[21] Susan Thistlethwaite is similarly mindful that what is now taken to be orthodox trinitarian language and theology results from an original contact with the Greco-Roman world and its basic presuppositions.[22] Trinitarian concepts and language became increasingly technical and involved as theology attempted to come to terms with these presuppositions. For many, as a result, this doctrine became unintelligible and so irrelevant to their Christian lives.

Although it is widely assumed that Christians ought to learn that God is Trinity, at some point in the West this doctrine lost its centrality. By the late eighteenth century, accounts of the Christian faith were written with little reference to trinitarian doctrine.[23] 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 ... Whether we are to worship three or ten

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[20] Christopher Hall, 'Adding up the Trinity', Review of Roderick T Leupp, *Knowing the Name of God*; Thomas Marsh, *The Triune God*; John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* and Peter Toon *et al*, *Our Triune God*, *Christianity Today* 41:5, 1997, 27.

[21] David S Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, 1998) 22.

[22] Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, 'On the Trinity', *Interpretation* 45:2, 1991, 163.

[23] Cunningham, *op cit*, i-ix.

persons in the Deity makes no difference'.[24] Shortly thereafter, F D E Schleiermacher (1768-1834) wrote in *The Christian Faith*: 'Our faith in Christ ... 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'.[25] Yet, throughout Christian history, *practices* continue to be trinitarian. With the split in the West between functional confession and philosophical doctrine comes a loss of intelligibility of trinitarian doctrine. This is compounded by two further conceptual seperations: the seperation of God's unity and God's trinity, and the seperation of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity.

iii. The seperation of concepts of God as One and God as Three

Western theological tradition has split the trinitarian doctrine of God into two parts, as has been commented on by many recent Western theologians. To explain why most Western theological accounts of the Trinity start from a notion of the one God, only to arrive at the notion of the triune God, Leonardo Boff gives an account in terms of Christianity's Judaic and Greek monotheistic inheritance. 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-trinitarian and a-trinitarian monotheism that has been hard to shake.[26] The pinnacle of the long historical development of this notion, according to Wolfhart Pannenberg, lies 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'.[27]

The basic problem with separating *De Deo Uno* from *De Deo Trino* is that it has given rise to a widespread assumption that the former is

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[24] Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans A W Wood and G di Giovanni, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge, 1996) 264.

[25] F D E Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans H R Mackintosh and J S Stewart (Edinburgh, 1928) 741.

[26] Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans Paul Burns (London, 1988) 16-18.

[27] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans G W Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1991) 1:288. See pages 288-291 for elaboration.

prior and fundamental, the latter but a later accretion at a lower level of symbolisation. Christoph Schwöbel has pointed to Eastern Orthodoxy's criticism of this aspect of Western theology: its marginalisation of the Trinity.[28] Outlining the consequences of this marginalisation, John Henry Newman warns of abandoning belief in God as three in favour of the oneness of God in the manner of the Unitarians; this approach will be met by a counter-revival of the Manichean dualism: God as two. Such a response in found in the early twentieth century in Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical Movement, which is merely a step away from outright atheism: God as none. Oakes refers to this as the 'Newmanian declension from Three to One to Two to None'.[29]

Recent Western critiques of the unitarian approach have examined the assumption that *De Deo Uno* is prior and fundamental. Moltmann diagnoses the problem as one of 'substance': the primacy of substance in thinking of personhood has had considerable consequences for Western theology and for Western thinking in general. For Moltmann, it has led to the disintegration of the doctrine of the Trinity into abstract monotheism.[30] Catherine LaCugna contends likewise 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'.[31] Out of critiques of this tradition in the West has come the challenge: to express intelligibly, as Pannenberg has asserted, that not only is the trinity compatible with the unity, but also that 'the thought of the unity is not relevant or consistent apart from the trinity'.[32]

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[28] Christoph Schwöbel, 'The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems and Tasks' in Christoph Schwöbel (ed) *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act* (Edinburgh and London, 1995) 5.

[29] Edward T Oakes, Review of David Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, *Theological Studies* 59:3, 1998, 529.

[30] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans Margaret Kohl (London, 1981) 17.

[31] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York, 1993) 168.

[32] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:291.

iv. The separation of concepts of economic Trinity and immanent Trinity

As unitarian formulations of God became increasingly remote from its confessional base, a further seperation occurred: the seperation of the concept of the immanent Trinity from the concept of the economic Trinity. This, as LaCugna describes it, is a seperation of *theologia* (God in Godself) from *oikonomia* (God For Us). The seperation, she argues, results in a deductive or descending order in the normal procedure for theology: first, God in Godself and then, God for Us.[33] Such a deduction compounds the difficulties of trinitarian intelligibility by reversing the order in which knowledge (revelation) of the trinitarian God is to be acquired.[34]

LaCugna has been particularly strident in her condemnation of this seperation, which she claims was reinforced in the Latin West by Augustine's pursuit of a 'psychological' analogy for intra-trinitarian relations: 'trinitarian doctrine thereafter would be concerned with relations "internal" to the godhead, disjoined from what we know of God through Christ in the Spirit'.[35] Robert Jenson notes also that, if propositions about the immanent Trinity become detached from the biblical triune narrative, then Christians are left with 'formulas without meaning'.[36] The biblical link is crucial as the foundation of Christian conceptualising; otherwise the result, as LaCugna puts it colourfully, is the unintelligible image of 'a "heavenly committee" of persons arranged nonlinearly (as in the triangle) or linearly (as in a vertical row)'.[37] LaCugna notes, by contrast, that 'we less frequently connect the idea of "Trinity" with the vision of the author of

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[33] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 43-44.
[34] See Carl Braaten (ed) *Our Naming of God*: *Problems and Prospects of God-talk Today* (Minneapolis, 1989) 16.
[35] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 44.
[36] Robert W Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1, *The Triune God* (New York and Oxford, 1997) 113.
[37] LaCugna, 'Practical Trinity', 680.

Ephesians: God's open and dynamic life of giving and receiving in which humanity graciously has been included as partner'.[38]

Karl Rahner's renowned axiom provides a definitive response to this seperation: 'The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity' [*Die ökonomische Trinität ist die immanente Trinität und umgekehrt*].[39] The challenge for trinitarian thought presented by its history of seperation is posed by Johnson: it must overcome the notion that in the study of the Christian God four elements must be considered, 'namely, one divine nature plus three divine persons'.[40] This is the challenge facing those concerned to make Christian trinitarian language intelligible and relevant today.

Facing the Problem of Trinitarian Intelligibility

For trinitarianism to remain intelligible, shifts in systems of thought and modes of expression must keep pace with linguistic and cultural change. Recent trinitarian writing confronts past philosophical systems by at once returning to scriptural witness and engaging with postmodern thought, thereby moving towards better doctrinal integration, on the one hand, and better intelligibility in contemporary terms, on the other. Cunningham notes in this regard the 'collective enthusiasm' among contemporary trinitarian theologians for the category of 'relationality', which is seen to provide an alternative to the traditional metaphysics of substance.[41] The focus of discontent with the latter lies in its tendency to obscure both God's internal relationality and God's relationality with the world.[42] Johnson explains: 'Classical thought classifies relation in the category of accident, thereby rendering it unsuitable for predication about divine nature [in which nothing inheres] ... Such a non-relational God invites

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[38] *Ibid*, 680-81.
[39] Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans Joseph Donceel (New York, 1970) 22. *Mysterium Salutis, Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, ed Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer, Vol 2; *Die Heilsgeschichte vor Christus,* Chapter 5 (Einsiedeln, 1967) 328.
[40] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 224.
[41] Cunningham, *op cit*, 25.
[42] *Ibid*.

widespread repugnance today'.[43] The collective enthusiasm for relationality represents a reaction to the domination of Western trinitarian theology by an original metaphysical concept of the 'single divine substance', a concept that has been translated first into the 'absolute subject' of German idealism and, later, into the 'individual' of the modern thought.

Colin Gunton emphasises that the classical doctrine of the Trinity is not 'to be understood as a "model", developed in its entirety in the past, which may now be obsolete *because the precise form of words in which it was formulated no longer satisfies modern rational criteria or theological developments*'.[44] It is rather a developing formulation.[45] An important part of the process of intellectual development involves remembering that trinitarian language only indirectly refers to God. The assumption of literal language is the enemy of intelligibility.

Cunningham has called for a new phase of trinitarian writing, which is to have three goals: recontextualising trinitarian thinking in the present; making it intelligible to Christian and non-Christian alike; and testifying to its significance for the Christian life.[46] Cunningham's approach reflects Gunton's in that both maintain that 'there is not a "model" known as trinitarian doctrine, a fixed set of formularies, but rather a process of intellectual development – a tradition – during the course of which a number of conceptual possibilities have been shaped'.[47] Their approach offers the scope for reinterpretation and redefinition of trinitarian concepts in the search for contemporary intelligibility.

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[43] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 224-25. See also William Norris Clarke, 'Theism and Process Thought', *New Catholic Encyclopaedia,* 1967-1974 Supplement, 648 and Jennifer Herrick, *Does God Change?* (Parkland, 2003) 70.

[44] Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh, 1997) 194; emphasis in original.

[45] *Ibid*, 195.

[46] Cunningham, *op cit,* ix.

[47] Gunton, *op cit*, 195.

A Meeting of Systems of Thought: the Concept of Person

If trinitarian doctrine is a developing intellectual tradition, then the concept of relationality offers the possibility of increasing its intelligibility. Applied to the notion of person, it has the potential to turn around the demise of trinitarian thought. Many academic theologians have recently sought to make traditional language used about the Christian trinitarian God intelligible by replacing static definitions of 'person' with a dynamic relational model.

This possibility has emerged from the encounter between classical and postmodern philosophical, sociological and anthropological systems of thought. A relational model of person is founded in biblical tradition and was developed by early Christian authorities, especially the Greek Cappadocians and later, John Damascene. Early foundations became obscured, however, in the Western Latin tradition, due in part to the dominance of Augustine's 'psychological analogy'. It has long been observed that two different forms of analogy have been used for the Trinity: that of the individual person and that of community.[48] Moltmann observes that 'ever since Augustine's development of the psychological doctrine of the Trinity the first has taken precedence in the West; whereas the Cappadocian Fathers and Orthodox theologians, down to the present day, employ the second category. They incline towards an emphatically social doctrine of the Trinity'.[49] Neil Ormerod finds fault not with the psychological analogy, but with the inability of modernity and postmodernity to appropriate it.[50]

In Orthodox Christianity, the Trinity of persons 'is not the product of the absolute Spirit developing outward or the internal differentiation of an ever-equal divine nature'.[51] The fundamental challenge of

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[48] See W. R. Matthews, *God In Christian Thought and Experiences* (London, 1930), 193.

[49] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 198-99.

[50] See Neil Ormerod, 'The Psychological Analogy for the Trinity: At Odds with Modernity', *Pacifica* 14, 2001, 288-90.

[51] Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community,* trans Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, 2000) 58.

trinitarian faith becomes: 'How do we equate three with one and one with three? How reach the unity of a single God from the Trinity of Persons? And how move from the unity of a single God to the Trinity of Persons?'.[52] With the complexity of these questions and the need to avoid the heresies of tritheism, subordinationism and modalism,[53] it has become a necessary and fundamental task to reconsider the concept of person.

Theological History and Significance of the Concept of Person

Historically, says Moltmann, 'trinitarian theology grew up through the theological remoulding of philosophical terms. This can be seen very well from the history of the concept "person"'.[54] 'Person' is a specifically Christian concept, as Pannenberg notes,[55] developed during the formulation of christological and trinitarian theology in the first five centuries of the Christian era. For Zizioulas, 'the concept of the person with its absolute and ontological content was born historically from the endeavour of the Church to give ontological expression to its faith in the Triune God'.[56] The theological significance of this history of the concept of person, says Zizioulas, 'includes a philosophical landmark, a revolution in Greek philosophy … A mode of expression ... which would give an ontological content to each person of the Holy Trinity, without endangering its biblical principles ... From this endeavour came the identification of hypostasis with person'.[57]

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[52] *Ibid,* 112.

[53] These are three erroneous ways of conceiving the persons of the Trinity: in tritheism it is said that each of the persons is a God; in subordinationism only the person of the Father is considered to be the true God; in modalism it is considered there is only one God and each of the persons are modes of that God's manifestation in the world.

[54] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 148.

[55] See Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Person', *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Handworterbuch für Theolgie und Religionswissenschaft,* cited in Coffey, *Deus Trinitas*, 67.

[56] Jean Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, 1993) 36.

[57] *Ibid*, 36-7.

In fitting the concept of person into the new Christian context, the Council of Chalcedon of 451 CE came to use two complementary terms – *hypostasis*, 'subsistence', and *prosopon,* expressing the spiritual dimension – to arrive at a notion of person as an individual, concrete, spiritual, subsistent being or spiritual supposition.[58] This theological reflection culminated in the sixth century definition of Boethius: *rationalis naturae individua substantia,* 'individual substance of a rational nature'.[59] This definition is central to the legacy of trinitarian thought in the West. Fifteen hundred years on, the critique of the development of this legacy has come to be a most important task for theologians facing the loss of trinitarian intelligibility.

Johnson has noted that the intrinsic difficulty of understanding the meaning of 'person' is the semantic drift of this term. Since the Enlightenment, 'the arcane philosophical meaning of person has receded in favour of an understanding of person as an individual centre of consciousness and freedom'.[60] Pannenberg has likewise observed that modernity involved a change from a metaphysical understanding to a psychological understanding.[61] Pannenberg points out that 'the conception of person as spiritual individuality continued to apply right into modern times, particularly in humanism and the Enlightenment. The latter saw the kernel of spiritual individuality in self-consciousness'.[62] But there are dangers in pursuing the modern psychological definition of person over the ontological language of antiquity. LaCugna points out the irony of the choice: one could retain the ecclesiastical definition of 'person' and risk the doctrine of the Trinity becoming unintelligible, or incorporate psychological

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[58] Coffey, *op cit*, 67.

[59] *Ibid*.

[60] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 203.

[61] Coffey, *op cit*, 68.

[62] Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Person', col 231, cited in Coffey, *op cit,* 68: 'Die Auffassung der Person als geistige Individualität blieb bis in die Neuzeit hinein wirksam, besonders in Humanismus und Aufklärung. Letztere sah den Kern der geistigen Individualität im Selbstbewußtsein'.

content into personhood and risk the doctrine of the Trinity lapsing into tritheism.[63]

Tritheistic and Modalistic Concerns

This new concept of person made the idea of three persons in one nature impossible.[64] This was because, as Boff observes, it led automatically in a tritheistic direction: when we say that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three divine persons, most people understand the word 'person' to mean an individual who has intelligence, will and feelings, who can say 'I'.[65] Johnson likewise observes that to say that God is three persons inevitably gives rise to a picture of God as three distinct people with seperated consciousnesses.[66] The difficulties of this psychological reinterpretation have been summed up by Coffey by pointing to the diverse connotations of the single word 'subject'.[67] For Moltmann, too, 'ever since Hegel, in particular, the Christian Trinity has tended to be represented in terms belonging to the general concept of the absolute subject'.[68] He notes that 'the one, identical, divine, subject can only be thought of as perfect subject if it can relate to itself. If it relates to itself this must be viewed as an eternal process of self-differentiation and self-identification of the absolute subject'.[69] The difficulty here is that 'the modern concept of God as absolute subject must renounce the trinitarian concept of person, because the concept of person also contains the concept of the subject of acts and relationships. It must ... choose for the trinitarian Persons another, non-subjective expression'.[70]

Karl Barth and Rahner therefore chose alternative terminology for the concept of person applied in trinitarian terms. Barth proposed

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[63] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 251.
[64] Kasper, *op cit*, 285.
[65] Boff, *Holy Trinity,* 51.
[66] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 203.
[67] Coffey, *op cit*, 68.
[68] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 17.
[69] *Ibid*.
[70] *Ibid*, 18.

speaking of 'three manners of being' [*drei 'Seinsweisen'*] and Rahner, 'three distinct manners of subsisting' [*drei 'distinkten Subsistenzweisen'*].[71] Despite the enormity of their influence, many theologians have come to regard these two approaches as inadequate:[72] 'If the concept of person is open to misunderstanding, the concept of "distinct manner of subsistence" is unintelligible', writes Kasper.[73] Not only this but 'no-one can invoke, adore and glorify a distinct manner of subsisting'.[74] Boff repeats the critique, stressing the abstraction of the formulation and noting the risk of modalism in these formulations.[75] Rahner was aware of the need to avoid modalistic misunderstanding, saying plainly, 'God is the concrete God in each one of these manners of given-ness – which, of course, refer to each other relatively, "without modalistically coinciding"'.[76] The difficulty may lie in the conceptual starting point of their analyses: LaCugna laments that Barth and Rahner were torn between Cartesian individualism and classical definitions, without being able to move beyond either.[77]

Between tritheism and modalism lies a gulf; many conclude, with Kasper, that there is 'no choice but to retain the traditional language of the church and interpret it'.[78] In order to interpret it, many have chosen to retain but redefine the concept of person in relational terms. Barth and Rahner failed to recognise this development in the concept of person: the movement away from the notion of the self-conscious subject and towards that of the 'being-in-relation'. Moltmann comments on Rahner's failure to countenance such a notion: 'What he describes is actually extreme individualism: … But the philosophical personalism of Hölderlin, Feuerbach, Buber, Ebner,

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[71] See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans G W Bromiley, (Edinburgh, 1975) Volume 1, Chapter 9. See also Rahner, *Trinity,* 103ff. See also Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Volume 4, trans Kevin Smyth (London, 1966) 77-102.
[72] Moltmann, *History and the Triune God,* xi-xii.
[73] Kasper, *op cit*, 288.
[74] *Ibid*.
[75] Boff, *Holy Trinity,* 52.
[76] Rahner, *Trinity*, 109.
[77] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 254.
[78] Kasper, *op cit,* 288.

Rosenstock and others was designed precisely to overcome this possessive individualism: the "I" can only be understood in the light of the "Thou"'.[79] With this development, Boff has confirmed that the crucial notion of person, essential in trinitarian doctrine, has now accreted meanings that were previously unthinkable.[80] For, as Johnson declares, 'personalist and postmodern philosophy insists on the qualification that the autonomous person is relational through and through'.[81] 'What is slowly coming to light is a new construal of the notion of the person, neither a self-encapsulated ego nor a diffuse self denied, but selfhood on the model of relational autonomy'.[82] Cunningham has declared that personhood cannot be divorced from relation, a claim he finds to be 'substantiated in a wide variety of humanistic disciplines, from sociology and psychology to history and literature'.[83] LaCugna also offers a sweeping array of supportive historical developments to reinforce Moltmann's point:

> In reaction to the atomism and solipsism of critical philosophy, new currents of thought had arisen in science, philosophy, and psychology that emphasised the social and relational character of personhood and indeed of all reality. Already in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Feuerbach, Fichte and Hegel had argued that persons exist only in relation. In the twentieth century, as different from each other as Whitehead's process philosophy, Sartrean existentialism, French phenomenology, Wittgenstein's language analysis and personalist philosophies might be, all of these postcritical movements sought to go beyond the dualism and individualism of the Cartesian tradition by giving priority to interaction and participation as modes of being and knowing. The 'self' who exists in the world as embodied is fundamentally relational. The personalist philosophies of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Felix Ebner and others would have been a distinct alternative to Descartes, Locke, and company.[84]

Recognising and appropriating theologically this development in the concept of person has profound implications for trinitarian thought.

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[79] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 145.
[80] Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 112.
[81] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 203.
[82] *Ibid*, 226.
[83] Cunningham, *op cit,* 27.
[84] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 255.

Reconceiving Person Relationally: Trinitarian Appropriations of the Concept of Person

New non-theological philosophical and linguistic developments have brought new categories to bear on the concept of person. Individuality and relationality have come to be seen as complementary in understanding of this concept: 'We can cut a path through many of the difficulties that beset the question by observing that all attempts to come to terms with it try to integrate two fundamental and apparently opposed concepts, individual and relation', says Coffey.[85] Coffey draws from Fichte who makes the important point that at the psychological level, individuality (or self-consciousness) and relation (or spiritually experienced interpersonal relation) are themselves intrinsically related and condition each other. Coffey asks whether, if this is so at the psychological level, is it not likely also to be so at the ontological level?[86] Gunton similarly recognises the interrelationship of individuality and relation in the concept of person. 'A person is different from an individual: the latter is defined in terms of seperation from other individuals; the person, in terms of relations with other persons'.[87]

The tension between 'individuality' and 'relation' informs a range of postmodern interpretations of person and, as Cunningham notes, 'theologians differ widely on the terminology that should be used' in speaking of the relation between them.[88] A couple of examples will suffice. For Boff, 'Person is indeed a being-in-oneself and hence means irreducible individuality, but this individuality is characterised by the fact of being always open to others. Person is thus a node of relationships facing all directions. Person is a being of relationships'.[89] Cunningham, on the other hand, has suggested that the problem of trinitarian thought has its origin in the naming of the three persons, which tends to individualise them.[90] For Cunningham,

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[85] Coffey, *op cit*, 66.

[86] *Ibid*, 69.

[87] Gunton, *op cit*, 11.

[88] Cunningham, *op cit,* 27.

[89] Boff, *Holy Trinity,* 49-50.

[90] Cunningham, *op cit,* 50.

the recent move to use categories of mutual and reciprocal relation has as its natural result the naming of the three persons using not nouns but verbs, words that denote the three as relations, rather than as substances or seperate individuals.[91] Gunton insists on the other hand that 'if there is to be a point in speaking of Father, Son and Spirit, rather than simply of God, then it is incumbent upon the theologian to say something of that in which their differences consist'.[92] Moltmann agrees that 'the concept of God may not do away with the subjective differences between the persons, because otherwise it would do away with the history which takes place between the Father, the Son and the Spirit'.[93] Within this range of views, it remains the case, as Cunningham has declared, that 'the subject has been "de-centred"'.[94] Whether the subject is seen as the one God or as each of the three persons, contemporary trinitarian thought is only intelligible within the context of this decentering process.

Balancing the Personal God and the Persons of the Trinity

A relational model of person has been able to show, as Moltmann has made clear, that 'the trinitarian persons are not to be understood as three different individuals, who only subsequently enter into relationship with one another ... But they are not, either, three modes of being or three repetitions of the One God'.[95] The need to understand the 'three in one' is the need to balance the personal God and the persons of the Trinity. A relational model of person does this by presenting the divine three persons in terms of communion:

> The idea became established that the triune God is a single communion or fellowship formed by the three divine persons themselves. The unity of the triune God is no longer seen in the homogeneous divine subject nor in the identical divine subject, but in the eternal *perichoresis* of Father, Son and Spirit. This insight has far-reaching consequences for ... human experiences of God; for the doctrine of the image of God in human beings and the

[91] See *ibid*, 64, 167-68.

[92] Gunton, *op cit,* xxiv.

[93] Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, 85.

[94] Cunningham, *op cit*, 220.

[95] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 175.

> conception of a creation which corresponds to God; for the doctrine of the unity and the form of the church as the 'icon of the Trinity'; and not least for the eschatological expectation of a new, eternal community of creation.[96]

Gunton similarly explains the significance of relationality in terms of communion. In a revolutionary manner, God is to be understood:

> as a communion of three persons – not individuals – in mutually constitutive relations with one another. Each is only what he is by virtue of what the three give to and receive from each other; and yet, by virtue of their mutually constitutive relations each is distinctive and particular. But … the doctrine of God has important implications for other, indeed all, aspects of human life and the being of the world.[97]

LaCugna affirms in her own way this interpretation: for her the Trinity demonstrates that God is relational and exists as 'diverse persons united in a communion of freedom, love, and knowledge'.[98]

The idea of God as communion is allowed by the combining of individuality and relationality in the concept of person. Boff states the point simply: 'Only persons can be in communion'.[99] This development gives intelligibility to theological language that is struggling to reconcile 'three in one'. Such an idea is not entirely new: Moltmann points to John Damascene's 'profound doctrine of the eternal *circumincessio* of the trinitarian Persons' as testimony to this.[100] Moltmann finds that 'the doctrine of the *perichoresis* links together in a brilliant way the threeness and the unity, without reducing the threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity in the threeness'.[101] We might ask: why has it taken till now for the West to return to and utilise this ancient concept? We can answer with Moltmann that:

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[96] Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, xii.

[97] Gunton, *op cit*, 12.

[98] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 243.

[99] Boff, *Holy Trinity,* 3.

[100] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 174. See John of Damascus *De Fide Orthodoxa* I, 4 (MPG 94, 789-1228) cited in *ibid*, 174 n 83.

[101] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 175.

> in the Western church's doctrine of the Trinity the concept of person was developed with particular emphasis. This had a strongly formative effect on Western anthropology. If today we understand Person as the unmistakable and untransferable individual existence, we owe this to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. But why was the concept of the *perichoresis* – the unity and fellowship of the Persons – not developed with equal emphasis? ... It is a typically Western bias to suppose that social relationships and society are less 'primal' than the person.[102]

This is a crucial insight in appreciating the state of play of trinitarian intelligibility in the West at the beginning of the 21st century. The effort to find intelligible language for the concept of the Trinity is focused on the overcoming of this bias.

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[102] *Ibid*, 199.