


Taking stock of the Trinitarian renaissance: What have we learnt?

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The re-appreciation of the Trinitarian confession in the twentieth century is widely considered a major theological development. Recently, several critical voices emerged, questioning the direction of these explorations. As response, the article identifies major emphases of this rediscovery, namely, the return to sources, the clarification of the function of the confession and its re-envisioning of the nature of divinity, the more centring of the Christian vision in one material principle, the heuristic potential for practical questions and the need for apophatism. The article appreciatively intimates the subtler dynamics to the enthusiasm for the Trinity and briefly highlights the presence of transcendence, narrativity, imagination, analogy and spirituality in the discourse. Some suggestions have been provided for future reflection.

Keywords: Trinity; Trinitarian renaissance; Divine attributes; Apophatism; Economic and immanent Trinity.

Introduction

It may be justified to take stock of the developments from time to time in a particular academic discipline or aspect thereof. The contribution of such an endeavour is to assist further research and to guide those entering into the field. The aim of this article is precisely to attempt undertaking such an endeavour in the field of Trinitarian theology. Broad lines of developments and outstanding beacons will be identified. The article intends to raise the presence of critical voices and also provide a preliminary evaluation. Specific attention will also be given, within the limited purview of an article, to some of the major literature available.

Enthusiasm and growing unease

The claim of an extraordinary *interest* in Trinitarian theology since the second half of the twentieth century hardly requires demonstration. The sheer volume of scholarly output speaks for itself. The often quoted view by the late Stanley Grenz (2004:6) that the renewal of Trinitarian thought be considered 'the greatest contribution of theology in the twentieth century' may express the opinion of many, especially systematic theologians.

A unanimous and precise *chronicle* of the impetus to this rediscovery does not exist. Seminal work by Karl Barth (see 1975:295–489) and Karl Rahner (see his 1997 work) is often referred to. The impact of the publication of *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 in 1932 (the first English translation 1936) and the 1967 essay on *The Trinity* by Rahner in the post-Vatican series *Mysterium Salutis* cannot be overemphasised. Two major theologians, each in his own way, placed this Christian confession centrally. Already in 1952, Claude Welch in his work, *In this Name*, prophetically detected a change in the valuation of the doctrine. The avalanche of interest since the 1970s has been long in the making, and a more detailed history of the Trinitarian renaissance may have a longer reach, travelling further back in time. An astute Trinitarian scholar like Fred Sanders (2012:22ff) started the narrative with Hegel two centuries ago. The enthusiasm of the 1970s and 1980s is a development that goes back a long way. Scholars like Helmer (2011:150) and Powell (2011:267) warn about the danger of a simplistic history of the Trinity, which assumes a neglect after the Reformation, only to be revived by Barth in the twentieth century.

What should be explicitly recorded is the presence of *dissenting voices*. The widespread appreciation of the Trinitarian doctrine has not happened without alarms raised by an increasing number of theologians. Marshall (2004) raises the question as to whether the Trinity has really been marginalised in the history of the Christian thought; his negative view (2004:200) that the new twentieth century interest amounts less to 'renewal' than to 'the eclipse of Trinitarian theology' is echoed by Holmes (2012:2) who claims in a book-length investigation that the underlying theology

Note: The collection entitled 'God as One', sub-edited by Erna Oliver (University of South Africa) and Willem Oliver (University of South Africa).

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of twentieth century Trinitarianism 'cannot be found in patristic, medieval, or Reformation accounts of the doctrine'. In a well-informed recent discussion, Peterson (2016:6) attends to 'historiographical missteps in Trinitarian theology', claiming that contemporary Trinitarian theology 'is currently threatened by its own success' (p. 35). A similar concern is voiced by Tonstad (2016:1) in a major work: 'Trinitarian theology has lost its way'. Harvey (2018) in the introduction to a major volume of essays summarises the resistance:

[T]he recent backlash against the renaissance theologians has gained such momentum that their entire project is in danger of becoming a footnote, bracketed in time and no longer worthy of investment. (p. 6)

Each one of the critics has his or her own particular problem with the Trinitarian discourse. However, two major sources of uneasiness crystallise in the discussions include (1) continuity with and interpretation of the Christian tradition and (2) the actual direction of Trinitarian application. The nature of the arguments represented by these theologians cannot be dismissed; it requires engagement. That a sense of fatigue could be emerging should be considered. One way of addressing these concerns is to try taking stock and to raise the questions more thoroughly.

Salient features, contestations and gains

Attempting to map the landscape of Trinitarian scholarship requires at least some initial exploration of the contours of theological developments. One also has excellent overviews available of theologians who tried to accomplish that precisely; see, for example, the descriptions by O'Collins (1999), Kärkkäinen (2009), Emery and Levering (2011), Phan (2011) and Schwöbel (2014). One would encounter in these discussions, at least, reference to the following six pointers:

- an emphasis on the Trinity as the *specific Christian* identification of God
- a renewed interest in the *Eastern tradition* and the Cappadocian Fathers
- an acknowledgement of the shift from substantial to more *relational* and communal modes of thinking
- an appreciation of *history* as a category for thinking God's nature
- an exploration of the *practical* significance of the doctrine to address social dilemmas
- and attempts at translating the confession into theologies representing *marginalised* voices.

Whether one could trace a similar configuration of ideas in the history of theology is highly questionable. Despite the concerns of detractors, something significant has taken place. A closer scrutiny of the discourse should minimally tend to the following *seven* outstanding questions, not only areas of contentions but also of potential enduring significance for theology.

Revisiting the sources

The return to the primary sources – biblical and historical – and the stimulus for a re-reading may be one of the most constructive consequences of renewed interest in the Trinity in the twentieth

century. Good sources have become available for a summary of the state of scholarship and for a more nuanced appeal to Scripture; see, for example, the relationship to the Old Testament, Huijgen (2017), and for a wider role of Scripture, Swain (2017).¹ What these studies obviously avoid is a simplistic proof-texting approach, but they still argue for a positive relationship.

The constructive proposals by theologians and the ensuing debates prompted new and energetic studies of the Patristic Period, especially Nicene theology, Augustine and Thomas. Typical popular claims of a drastic division between the East and the West, scapegoating of Augustine for everything ill in the Western individualistic culture and of Thomas for the metaphysical perversion of dynamic biblical categories motivated in-depth revisionist studies. Again good overviews are available for an orientation to the debates, see, for example, Ayres and Radde-Gallwitz (2008) and Coakley (2007). Increasingly, one encounters arguments for a more complex narrative of the fourth century's search for a 'grammar of divinity',² for a less fundamental division between Latin and Greek Trinitarian theology³ and for a greater appreciation of the apophatic tradition and divine incomprehensibility. Augustine and Thomas attracted particular investigation, and a host of studies have tried to rehabilitate them from being demonised too hastily.⁴ Apart from these polemical figures, one also finds major investigations of the doctrine of the Trinity in theologians such as Luther, Calvin, Edwards and Schleiermacher.⁵ These few references serve only the purpose of calling attention to an outstanding result of 20th century interest in the Trinity. Obviously, there is the need for a more in-depth interaction with these studies and what they entail for a new story of the Trinity in the history of theology and the church.

Part of this section should also mention the return to the 'grammar of Trinitarian speak' or the *conceptuality* of Trinitarian thought. Traditional terminology like 'nature', 'person', 'perichoresis', 'processions' and 'missions' have been re-investigated. Especially, a notion like 'perichoresis' has become popular in its potential analogical sense, for example, rethinking ecclesial or social relations as perichoretic. Quite predictably this has been the occasion for a wide difference of opinion (see Crisp 2005; Otto 2001).

What transpires from this line of research are the complexity of language, the genius of the Patristic Period and the unlikely substitution of these traditional terminologies. The return to the genealogy has been enriching, sobering and even motivating.

1. Swain (2017:42–47), with an exceptionally helpful and informed treatment, distinguishes three 'patterns of divine naming': a monotheistic, a relational and a metaphysical one.

2. The seminal study by Ayres (2004) on Nicea should be mentioned. Significant responses to his work by scholars like J Behr and K Anatolios, who have produced major Nicene histories themselves, are found in the *Harvard Theological Review* (100:2) of 2007.

3. See, for example, the discussion by Barnes (1995b).

4. See, for example, Green (2007) and McCurry (2005), respectively. Williams (2016:172) claims that 'the connection made between Augustine and the consciousness of "modernity" is a serious error'. See also Ayres (1995) and Barnes (1995a) on Augustine.

5. See Baars (2004), Helmer (2017), Plantinga Pauw (2002) and Poe (2017).

Articulating the ‘point of the Trinity’

In one of his essays, Jenson (1995) formulates the critical question about the ‘point of Trinitarian theology’.⁶ This seemingly simple issue allows ways to part between the minimalists and the maximalists. For some, it is strictly a statement about the status of Jesus Christ and the Spirit; one finds this explicitly, for example, in the discussion by the Dutch theologian Van De Beek (2017:272–274).⁷ More expansive approaches view the Trinity as a revelation of the very nature of the divine that should be explored contra typical theistic notions and that generates – analogically – possibilities to speak about humanity and about society. For some, like Dalferth (1995:168, 170), it has a ‘regulative’ and not a ‘descriptive’ function, providing the ‘grammar of the Christian perspective on God, world, human existence and history, and everything else’.⁸ It is unlikely that the currents will converge.

Despite strong dissenting voices, the Rahner Rule and the emergence of social Trinitarianism have permanently impacted the Christian doctrine of God. Both *history* and *relationality* have become categories to think of the divine in the Christian faith, which cannot be ignored. If the starting point for doing Trinitarian theology is the *oikonomia*,⁹ then the revelation in the incarnation and the distinction between divine persons should be taken with utmost seriousness. If the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa, God’s very identity cannot remain unaffected, for example, by the event of the cross. If the distinction of three persons are acknowledged, the move to relationality as primary category cannot be avoided. The choice of an epistemic point of departure carries ontological implications. This has clearly been observed by social Trinitarians.¹⁰ There is undeniably something *disruptive* about the Christian construal of divinity; it challenges the typical theistic conceptions of how ‘a God should be like’.

Rethinking the attribute tradition

It was inevitable that divine attributes would appear on the theological radar in an atmosphere of Trinitarian enthusiasm. Could the typical attributes like immutability still be maintained when history and relationality become primary lenses to view God? Increasingly, an awareness crystallised that the Christian God is a ‘hybrid deity’ (Gunton 2002:1–18), combining typical philosophical and theological traits. The structural move by Barth (1957:322–677), placing a treatment of the divine ‘perfections’ after a discussion of the Trinity, should be considered one of the truly seminal insights of the twentieth century. This dismantled a long tradition

6.The answer of Jenson (1995: 37, 42) is simple: ‘the biblical story about God and us is true of and for God himself’.

7.Says Van De Beek (2017): ‘De triniteitsleer wil ten diepste niets anders zeggen dan dat Jezus God is, evenals de Geest, en dat zij samen met de eeuwige Vader in de hemel één zijn. Alles wat er meer gezegd wordt, leidt af van waar het om gaat’ (p. 274).

8.Fermer (1999) raises the question about the Trinity as ‘methodological paradigm’ and emphasises the limits of it.

9.See Sanders (2007) for a discussion. He understands the task of the Trinitarian doctrine, ‘to describe the connection between God and the economy of salvation’ (p. 35).

10.For a good overview, see Thompson (1997), and for a discussion of the debate, see Van Den Brink (2014).

prominent, for example, in Early Modern Theology (Beck 2016:199ff, 204f). The very Triune identity of God should inform an understanding of the attributes. It has become widely accepted that the attributes should be Trinitarianly interpreted.¹¹ Consequently, one also encounters drastic reinterpretations.

For example, the power of God cannot be conceived without considering divine weakness and vulnerability.

Some conceptions, like divine simplicity and immutability, remain areas of intense contestation. Creative suggestions to rethink God along novel lines and with current categories, like gift and excess, are some of the intriguing ramifications of the Trinitarian recovery. Kärkkäinen (2014:310ff), who has written extensively on Trinitarian theology, argues for an appreciation of ‘hospitality’ as divine description. If the renaissance had made one single contribution, it is to be located here: it encourages a rethinking and reinterpretation of our understanding of what ‘God’ refers to. A Trinitarian optic destabilises conventional connotations and associations and steers thinking into uncharted direction.

Re-centring the Christian vision

If the Christian God is identified as Trinitarian, one major implication crystallises from this is that the entire Christian vision – from creation to the eschaton – should be Trinitarianly envisioned. This basic material norm has become the central optic to understand reality, mankind and church.¹² The turn to relationality has facilitated this shift and even assisted to make this a fairly easy undertaking. Trinitarian ontologies, anthropologies and ecclesiologies are basically relational constructions.¹³ The significant systematic contributions by theologians like Barth, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Gunton and Migliore, to refer only to a few, should be seen in this trajectory of doing theology. A closer scrutiny reveals the ramifications. Proof-texting has been eclipsed by constructive re-imagining, and the entire vision acquired a greater coherence. A much more distinct Christian symbolic world is created as a consequence of this. The problem, however, lies with an appeal to the Bible with its myriad of voices on, for example, the human self. One encounters here an important development in Systematic Theology but also one which requires continued reflection. The question of theological methodology remains an open-ended quest, but the Trinitarian renaissance has left an indelible mark.

Exploring the practical possibilities

The opening statement in LaCugna’s major work on the Trinity (1973:1) – ‘The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian

11.See, for example, the discussion of Jüngel and Krötke in Holmes’s work (2007).

12.McCormack (2012:7) makes the insightful remark that one major feature of ‘modern theology’, starting with Schleiermacher, has been the use of ‘a material norm as both a heuristic device and a critical principle’.

13.The literature is quite voluminous. One collection of essays by Metzger (2005) may be referred to; the contributions by Grenz on anthropology and Volf on ecclesiology deserve special mentioning.

life' – has become programmatic for much of the subsequent Trinitarian theology. A host of socio-ethical and theological questions have been approached Trinitarianly. The Trinitarian grammar seems such a fitting language to speak theologically about dilemmas of identity, alterity, unity and diversity, sexuality, entanglement and religious plurality.¹⁴

To explore the socio-political implications of a relational God generated surprising enthusiasm. The perennial problems of autocracy, of discrimination and of inequality are seemingly solved by reference to the Triune God, as we find here true mutuality, respect and recognition. The debate was not whether the Trinity has political implications but whether one approaches this via the notion of 'model' or of 'participation'; do Christians 'echo' the God they worship or do they participate in the divine life and consequently live different lives (see Cunningham 1998)? It was precisely this expansive heuristic employment of the Trinity that elicited a severe reaction from many theologians. Kilby (2000:442) points to the projection inherent in the procedure, stating that 'what is projected onto God is immediately reflected back onto the world'. Tanner (2004:324), in a similar vein, deems the insights generated by Trinitarian thinkers as mere platitudes; it conveys ideas we already know.¹⁵ The resistance to much Trinitarian application would produce a sobering effect. It is unlikely that most theologians would revert back to a soteriological truncation of the confession. Greater attention to the rhetoric of Trinitarian construction, greater sophistication in the development of argumentation may be the long-term result.

Renaming the Trinity

Historians of theology would most likely refer to the irruption of subaltern voices as one of the most significant developments in theology during the second half of the twentieth century. The critique of tradition and the reconstruction of the Christian faith have been beyond any expectation. When subjugated voices, whether because of gender, race, class, sexual orientation or physical disability, are centred, intellectual energy is unleashed to generate new sets of questions and perspectives. The doctrine of God, as the central religious symbol, has become a site of struggle. The dominant male imagery and subordinationist traits could not escape attention. The link between God-image and self-formation and social dynamics has become critical research problems to address. Engagements by theologies of the other, for example, feminist and African, with the doctrine of the Trinity, disclosed the pathological potential of the confession, but at the same time liberative resources for thinking human about authenticity. The large number of proposals by these theologies¹⁶ prioritised language and metaphor, identity and

14. For a few representative examples, see Gunton (1993) on the problem of the one and the many, Volf (1998) on identity construction, Rogers (1999) on sexuality, Kärkkäinen (2004) on religious plurality and Polkinghorne (2010) on entanglement and science.

15. Both Kilby and Tanner are not dismissive of the political implications of the Trinity but suggest alternative approaches; Kilby's (2014) proposal entails an apophatic re-visioning, and Tanner (2004:330) prefers participation in the divine life to imitation.

16. For feminist interaction with Trinitarian theology, see, for example, Bacon (2012), Fox (2011), Greene-McCreight (2000) and Harrison (2011). The major work by

communion, relationality and reciprocity, as never seen before in Trinitarian theology. Novel categories of thought, for example, God and desire, and God and ancestorship, entered theological discourse. The ability of voices from the (conventional) margins to activate the theological imagination should be clearly acknowledged.

Retrieving apophatism

One cannot miss the presence and even advocacy for an apophatic approach to the Trinity.¹⁷ This may entail the retrieval of a Patristic sensibility or even a corrective to over-enthusiastic practical employment of the doctrine. An outstanding scholar and observer of theological trends like Tracy (2011:123ff) refers to 'over-confident and non-apophatic modern Trinitarian theologies'; while expressing his appreciation for the relational achievement, he pleads for the naming of God in terms of the 'impossible' and for retrieving the forms of 'incomprehensibility' and 'hiddenness'. One encounters similar echoes in the theologies of Kilby (2010) and Coakley (2013). These apophatic orientations may assist theologians to honour the ultimate mystery of the Triune God and encourage the crucial link with spirituality (for one good discussion, see Downey 2000). This generates the crucial possibility that Trinitarian theology touches concrete life and overcomes the perennial threat of a divide between life and thought. The fairly hesitant attitude to mysticism in Protestant theology may also be challenged by this. The work by Hunt (2010) on the mystics and the Trinity is a significant contribution in this regard. This is a fruitful development and deserves careful attention.

Having discussed these seven outstanding developments, one may now turn to an overall but brief conclusion.

A hesitant, deeper probing

A number of questions pertinent to such an overview should still to be alluded to, especially questions about the reasons behind the interest in the Trinity and what the future direction may entail. The first one has been postponed intentionally, to be addressed only after the outstanding features have been highlighted. A few comments will be made to intimate an answer to the 'why' and 'where to' questions.

1. The enthusiasm for the Trinitarian confession may signal the continued and enduring relevance of *transcendence*. Like Barth's oeuvre that could be interpreted as a complex interaction with the nineteenth century and with modernity, the renaissance could be viewed along similar lines. The narratives of secularisation and the drive towards immanentism should always recount also the resistance stories. It is unlikely that the divine referent will be eclipsed. God remains for a significant number of people important for sense-making of life.

Johnson (1992) and Coakley (2013) deserve special mentioning. For African theologians engaging the Trinity, see Bitrus (2017), Kombo (2009), Kunhiyop (2015), Manganyi and Buitendag (2013), Mosicke (2017) Ogbonnaya (1994) and Vähäkangas (2000).

17. For a good recent discussion, see Van Kuiken (2017).

2. The quest for *identity*, for a desire for belonging, should not be underestimated. The conviction that the Trinitarian confession is a specific Christian identification of the Sacred, with unique features, radiates a definitive appeal. In a world of many unsettling pluralities, this functions as a centripetal force, a point of orientation, beyond denominational boundaries and binds Christians together.
3. It is important to single out and to acknowledge, despite many critical voices, the *problem-solving potential* of the confession. The fundamental 'turn to relationality' in philosophy¹⁸ found a natural ally in Trinitarian theology. The need for a *relational* ontology could be addressed theologically, with impressive heuristic potential. This natural alignment, this fit between the present time and theology, should not be ignored when we encounter it in the work by Trinitarian 'minimalists'. The turn to social Trinitarianism enabled theologians to engage with a wide spectrum of contemporary issues and do that from a 'thick' theological perspective. The Trinitarian God does matter.
4. When relationality is coupled with the inherent *narrative* structure of the Christian divine biography, a *surplus of meaning* transpires. The stories of YAHWEH, the stories of the Jesus-event and the stories of the Spirit-filled early church form a drama, which calls for engagement and interpretation. The frightening 'dark side', the attractive pathos and the astonishing vulnerability captivate the human mind. The storied character of the Christian God cannot but intrigue, and this has been clearly grasped in the twentieth century.
5. This fascination has gripped the theological *imagination*. The numerous attempts to suggest reconstructive renamings and to propose social applicability are indicative of the realisation that God-speak belongs to the faculty of human imagination. The God-referent should not be imprisoned in stale historical re-pristination but should be allowed to be expressed in theo-poetics. Maybe this has occurred in many instances during the Trinitarian renaissance. The very nature of the Christian identification of God encourages novel ways of employing the divine grammar.

Venturing into the future is obviously audacious; one could at most speak in a subjunctive mood and try to make informed extrapolations from the present condition. Maybe *five comments* could be made. One – one cannot speak of 'Trinitarian fatigue' yet, but the discourse is clearly in a stage of *consolidation*. Significant historical and constructive work has been completed; it may be the time for retrospective interpretation. Two – future creative Trinitarian theology would be more cautious in 'application' after the stream of substantial critical voices. Attention would be given to *accountable argumentation* and limited analogical thinking. Three – there are no signs of a major constructive work on the horizon. Maybe detailed investigation of specific historical periods, or persons or concepts may become the way forward – small *incremental revisions*. Four – creative and novel work would to a large extent depend on new readings of the *current horizon*. The exhaustion of fashionable labels – like postmodern and post-colonial – obviously have a stifling influence on new Trinitarian

18. For an excellent discussion, see Shults (2003:11–36).

explorations. A sensitive antenna for new 'namings of the present' may also stimulate Trinitarian theology. Five – the vitality of the confession would to a large extent be determined not only by its interpretative potential but also by its ability to shape a *way of life*. The Christian identification of the divine should, in the final instance, contribute to human and planetary flourishing.

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R.V. is the sole contributor to this work.

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