


# South African discourse on the Triune God: Some reflections

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This contribution offers a critical rejoinder with regard to 12 articles submitted for publication in *HTS Theological Studies* 'to stimulate a discussion on the Holy Trinity for the 21st century within the South African environment'. It raises the provocative question: what if these 12 articles may be regarded as a barometer for contemporary South African discourse on the Trinity – even if this is evidently (and hopefully!) not the case? It addressed five questions in this regard: (1) who are the authors that contributed articles and where are they situated? (2) Who are their conversation partners or interlocutors? (3) What issues, themes and problems have they focused on? (4) How is the public significance of the doctrine of the Trinity portrayed within the (South) African context? (5) What issues, themes and problems were not discussed? It concludes that there are crucial problems related to the economic Trinity that are, by and large, not addressed in this set of contributions.

**Keywords:** Creation; Economic trinity; Filioque; Immanent trinity; Inter-religious dialogue; Salvation; South Africa; Spirit.

## Introduction

Following correspondence with the guest editors of this edition of *HTS Theological Studies*, I agreed to offer a critical rejoinder to the 12 contributions on the doctrine of the Trinity referenced here. I refrained from contributing an essay of my own because I published a few recent articles on the doctrine of the Trinity (see below) and it was not clear to me what I could add that would not be repetitive. Such a review does provide an opportunity to assess the state of the debate in South Africa on the doctrine of the Trinity, following an earlier survey of literature in the field of systematic theology in South Africa offered by Rian Venter (2016).

To make this viable and provocative, let me make a (false!) assumption, namely, that these 12 articles may serve as a barometer of current South African discourse on the Trinity in academic forms of Christian theology. This assumption may be regarded as plausible only if the invitation to contribute an article was indeed widely circulated, perhaps on the basis of snowball sampling, to scholars working in the field, to, as the invitation reads, 'stimulate a discussion on the Holy Trinity for the 21st century within the South African environment'. If so, what stimulus does this set of contributions offer?

Some qualifications would be immediately necessary: firstly, there are obviously several South African scholars interested in Trinitarian discourse that could not contribute for whatever reason. If they did, that would have led to different results. Secondly, those who did contribute may have done so for personal, even opportunistic reasons, especially given the carrot of subsidies and the perceived need to 'publish or perish', again distorting the picture. Thirdly, there are factors in terms of institutional capacity that allow scholars at public universities to make such contributions and inhibit others, especially those based at private service providers to do the same. Fourthly, the qualification 'academic theology' is crucial as the picture may look quite different when the focus is broadened to include liturgy, preaching, prayers, catechism, views of ordained Christian leaders and experiences of lay Christians. Fifthly, it is not necessarily obvious what would count as Trinitarian discourse. One may adopt a deeply Trinitarian theology without explicitly focusing on the theme of the Trinity, while the inverse may be true as well.

Given these considerations it should be clear that these 12 contributions can hardly serve as a barometer for contemporary South African discourse on the doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, as I will suggest below, I would certainly hope that these would *not* serve as such a barometer!

**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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Despite these caveats, one may still wonder: what if it was indeed such a barometer? What would that say about the state of debate in South African discourse on the Trinity if these contributions are indeed more or less reflective of it? This question is not meant as a criticism of the quality of the individual contributions, far from it. Instead, it explores an agenda for what would be required in this regard.

In this critical rejoinder I will raise the following five questions and structure the argument accordingly: (1) who are the authors that contributed articles and where are they situated? (2) Who are their conversation partners and/or interlocutors? (3) What issues, themes and problems have they focused on? (4) How is the public significance of the doctrine of the Trinity portrayed within the (South) African context? (5) What issues, themes and problems were not discussed? Let me explore these questions one by one.

## Who are the authors?

For the purposes of this rejoinder, I am taking into account 12 contributions that were forwarded to me, involving 13 authors, by J.P. Deetlefs (research fellow, systematic theology, University of Free State), Ramathathe Dolamo (University of South Africa, ethics, emeritus), Retief Müller (history of Christianity, Stellenbosch University), Christo Lombaard (Old Testament and Christian spirituality, University of South Africa), Danël Louw (practical theology, Stellenbosch University, emeritus), Willem Oliver and Erna Oliver (Christian spirituality, church history and missiology, University of South Africa), Johannes Reimer (missiology and intercultural theology, Ewersbach University of Applied Arts, affiliated to University of South Africa), Teddy Sakupapa (ecumenical theology and systematic theology, University of Western Cape), Dirk van der Merwe (New Testament studies, North-West University), Henco van der Westhuizen (systematic theology, University of Free State), Rian Venter (systematic theology, University of Free State) and Anné Verhoef (philosophy and systematic theology, North-West University). I also received a second contribution by Dirk van der Merwe, but opted not to include this in the survey because it is only indirectly related to the 'Holy Trinity' and includes material and references that are closely related to his first contribution, so that the repetition would skew the analysis that I will offer. A (forthcoming) contribution by Tanya van Wyk (systematic theology, University of Pretoria, see 2013) was not included in this analysis. I received most of these in a pre-published and pre-reviewed form and therefore comment on submissions rather than actual publications in *HTS Theological Studies* in a finalised form.

All the authors who contributed articles to this volume of *HTS* have institutional links with South African public, that is, government-subsidised universities. There are four contributions from Unisa (where the editor is located), three from the University of the Free State, two from Stellenbosch University, two from North-West University and one from the University of the Western Cape. Note the absence of private service providers such as the South African Theological Seminary (the largest institution

teaching Christian theology in the country), Fort Hare, University of KwaZulu-Natal and University of Pretoria (albeit that a contribution by Tanya van Wyk was still forthcoming), public universities where teaching on the doctrine of the Trinity would form part of the curriculum.

It is remarkable that not all authors work primarily in the fields of systematic theology and ethics, as one may have expected. Of the 13 authors, three work on the history of Christianity and one each in Old Testament, New Testament, practical theology and missiology. Such multidisciplinary perspectives are certainly to be welcomed, but it is also highly unlikely that this is indeed reflective of South African discourse on the Trinity.

Of the 13 authors, 11 are South African citizens, while Sakupapa is of Zambian origin and Reimer is based in Germany. Of the other 11 only Dolamo would not have been classified as 'white' under apartheid. Twelve are male, while Erna Oliver (a co-author) is the only female contributor. It is not always clear from the biographic details provided, but it seems that at least 11 of the 13 authors have roots in the reformed tradition (mostly of Dutch origin, except for Sakupapa), while Dolamo draws mostly on Lutheran sources and Reimer participates in the 'Worldwide Evangelical Alliance'. This clearly provides a skewed picture in terms of confessional traditions. Judging by the names and surnames, 10 of the 13 authors have Afrikaans as their home language. If this would serve as an accurate barometer, then it would seem that it is mostly Afrikaans authors who are interested in Trinitarian discourse. This is hopefully not true!

Categories of gender, race, language and sexual orientation are by no means irrelevant for the doctrine of the Trinity (as Venter recognises), so that such demographic factors may already distort the picture, but it is clear that this barometer of the state of the debate on the doctrine of the Trinity is dominated by a small sector of Christianity in South Africa. Why would that be the case? Given the traditional terminology on God as Father, Son and Spirit, the gender imbalance is particularly conspicuous. Calvin (1960), for example, used analogies such as source, wisdom and power (see *Institutes* I.13.18).

## Who are the conversation partners and/or interlocutors?

Since the earliest Christian apologists, the conversation partners of Christian theology mattered, and then almost always in two ways: on the one hand, it resists a Tertullian isolation where 'Jerusalem' has nothing to do with 'Athens' so that the full scope of God's coming reign can be acknowledged. On the other hand, conversation partners typically shape and distort theological positions through the worldviews, conceptual frameworks, conceptual tools and vocabularies that are adopted. This is especially evident from the engagement of patristic authors with neo-Platonism, despite its critique of Gnosticism, and from liberal theology's

engagement with the 'cultural despisers of religion'. Liberation theology typically claims to adopt the poor and oppressed working class as their primary interlocutors, but then, equally typically, engages with the intellectual elite who seek to represent such voices. In patristic, medieval and modern times, such conversation partners were typically 'philosophers', but certainly also included the imperial and royal elite. One example is John Calvin's address to king Francis of France included in all editions of the *Christian Institutes*. More recently, such conversation partners not only come from a wide array of other disciplines in the humanities and social science but also from natural sciences such as physics, evolutionary biology, climate science and geology (in the Anthropocene).

It would be possible to offer a detailed quantitative analysis of the citations and bibliographic references (a total of 553 such references are found in the bibliographies of the 12 contributions included here). Because that would create the impression that these contributions may indeed serve as an accurate barometer of South African discourse on the Trinity, I will refrain from this and instead offer a few impressions, but back that up with some statistics where appropriate.

Firstly, given the theme of the Trinity, it comes as no surprise that most of the conversation partners are other theologians, and not scholars working in other disciplines. There are some exceptions though, especially in the contributions by Lombaard (journalism and communication studies), Reimer (art) and Verhoef (philosophy, film and literature), while Sakupapa also includes references to debates on decoloniality. There are 12 references to publications in the field of Old Testament Studies, no less than 72 references to publications in the field of New Testament Studies and 50 to the field of Patristic studies.

Secondly, the vast majority of the conversation partners are situated in the North Atlantic region and/or published contributions in that context. Clearly, if this is an accurate barometer, then a decolonial critique of Christian theology remains urgent. Within the North Atlantic, American (×77) and British (×50) references dominate, while there are some contributions which also engage with Dutch (×13), German (×72, of which 37 are to Welker – mostly in Van der Westhuizen – and 9 to Moltmann) and Nordic (×9) publications. This is not quite the full picture though. Some contributors do engage with Eastern Orthodox views (×32, for example, in Louw and Reimer, both with references in German). There are a few references to Latin American sources (×6), especially to Leonardo Boff (×3), while very few contributors engage with Asian theologians (×3).

Müller and, especially, Sakupapa engage with African authors situated outside South Africa (×37), while there is at least a footnote in Venter's mapping of the terrain to such sources.

There are very few essays that engage with South African contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity, except for Van der Westhuizen who draws extensively on his mentor

Dirkie Smit's work (×10 references), but then only in his conclusion. The other references to South African authors are almost all only in passing and then to Wessel Bentley (Verhoef), David Bosch (Reimer), Ernst Conradie (Dolamo), Celia Kourie (Lombaard), Johan Meylahn (Verhoef), Rian Venter (×5, 4 by his UFS colleagues Van der Westhuizen and Deetlefs) and Robert Vosloo (×4, by Deetlefs, Van der Westhuizen). There are only two references to black South African authors, namely, Takatso Mofokeng and Gabriel Setiloane (both in Sakupapa), and a passing reference to Desmond Tutu (in Louw). In addition, there are 26 self-references that are not factored in here.

Thirdly, what is most surprising is that there are so few references that appear in more than one contribution.

There are some exceptions of course (especially Catherine Lacugna, Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf and surprisingly not Zizioulas), but it is hard to avoid the impression that South African discourse on the Trinity (again *if* this collection may serve as a barometer) takes place in silos where authors engage in extensive conversations with selected other scholars but hardly with each other. One would expect at least some cohesion between authors based at the institutions formerly aligned with reformed churches of Dutch origin, but even there this is not evident.

This does not apply to the two contributions that deliberately seek to offer a review of the available literature. Rian Venter offers an overview of contemporary discourse in the Trinity, but most of his references are to North Atlantic authors, while there is one footnote to African discourse on the Trinity and no references to South African authors, albeit that he contributes an earlier essay on that within the (post-) apartheid context (see Venter 2016). The other exception is Teddy Sakupapa who, as a Zambian, engages extensively with the views of Western and African theologians and includes at least references to South African authors such as Mofokeng, Setiloane and Venter.

One may argue that such a diversity of conversation partners is to be appreciated, but it is a rather sad indictment of the state of the debate that there is no real debate, little appreciation (except for Van der Westhuizen's use of Smit and Reimer's endorsement of Bosch) and virtually no substantive critique or self-critique (except for Sakupapa's discussion of modern African theologies). There is no discussion of the rather deep divides between, let us say, apartheid and anti-apartheid theology (see Loubser 2003; Venter 2016), 'evangelical' and 'ecumenical' theology, 'Belhar' and 'Kairos', 'white theology' and 'black theology', so-called mainline churches of mainly European origin and a wide range of Pentecostal, AIC and other 'independent' theologies, 'exclusivist', 'inclusivist' and 'pluralist' position on religious diversity, issues of gender (see Hadebe 2013; Leene 2015), class, race and sexual orientation and so forth. As I will suggest below, there is a need for sustained debate on a number of highly contested issues that are

(or should be) deeply embedded in Trinitarian discourse, but such debate is not found in this collection.

Fourthly, if this were to be a barometer of South African discourse on the Trinity, one would expect ample references to the contributions by senior South African theologians (excluding Biblical scholars) and church leaders of the last generation or two. Let me make a provisional list to which others may add many further names: Denise Ackerman, Hannes Adonis, Anthony Balcomb, Daryl Balia, Brigalia Bam, Musawenkosi Biyela, Allan Boesak, Willa Boesak, Nico Botha, Russel Botman, Coenie Burger, Isak Burger, Manas Buthelezi, Frank Michael Cassidy, Chikane, James Cochrane, Mvume Dandala, John de Gruchy (2013:130–132), Steve de Gruchy, Etienne de Villiers, David du Plessis, Jaap Durand (1976, 2007), Cornel du Toit, Sigqibo Dwane (see 1982), Felicity Edwards, John Fischer (2017), Brian Gaybba (1987, 1994), Bongajola Goba, Shun Govender, Johan Heyns (1978:47–52), Willie Jonker (1977, 1981), Johann Kinghorn, Wolfram Kistner, Adrio König (1975), Nico Koopman (2003, 2007a, 2007b), Louise Kretschmar, Klippiess Kritzinger, Christina Landman, Japie Lapoorta, Henry Lederle, Christo Lombard, Simon Maimela, Tinyiko Maluleke (see 2016), Ben Marais, Ray McCauley, Piet Meiring, Bernadette Mosala, Itumeleng Mosala, David Mosoma, Mokgethi Motlhabi, Malusi Mpulwana, Beyers Naudé, Piet Naudé (2004), Njongonkulu Ndugane, Nelus Niemandt, Albert Nolan, Klaus Nürnberger (2006:291–330), Jerry Pillay, Barney Pityana, FJM Potgieter, Isabel Phiri, Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel, Susan Rakoczy (2004, 2008), Neville Richardson, Hennie Rossouw, Willem Saayman, Augustine Shute, Zipho Siwa, Peter Storey, John Suggit, Flip Theron, Buti Thlagale, Rothney Tshaka, Molefe Tsele, Desmond Mphilo Tutu, Wentzel van Huyssteen, Anton van Niekerk, Amie van Wyk, Danie Veldsman, Vuyani Vellem, Charles Villa-Vicencio, Koos Vorster, Conrad Wethmar, David Williams (2000, 2003, 2004) and surely countless others.

The point is that these authors are all conspicuous in their absence (excluding those already mentioned above and scholars working mainly in the field of religious studies). Even if some of these theologians never wrote about the doctrine of the Trinity (but several of them did!), this observation would by itself invite critical reflection on the state of Trinitarian discourse in South Africa. The absence of explicit reflections on the Trinity also raises the question of what constitutes a Trinitarian theology: one may write about the Trinity without adopting a Trinitarian theology, while one's theology may be deeply Trinitarian without making that explicit as a thematic interest.

## What themes and/or theological problems are explored?

It may be best to identify the themes and theological problems discussed in this set of contributions by offering a very brief summary of each essay, in alphabetical order.

In an essay entitled 'Political implications of the Trinity: Two approaches', J.P. Deetlefs explores a core theme in the recent renaissance of Trinitarian theology, namely, the shift from a metaphysics of substance to one of relationality. His interest is in the perceived social implications of this shift. He identifies two contrasting approaches in this regard. The one focuses on imitating God's character, the vocation to represent God to the world in a visible way. The other one focuses on participating in God's relationality, suggesting a sense of belonging, community and hospitality because humans cannot imitate God. Deetlefs argues that both these options are valid and compatible with each other.

In an essay entitled 'A Trinitarian theology of creation: An ethical perspective', Ramathate Dolamo assumes that an inadequate understanding of the doctrine of creation can contribute to ecological destruction in general and climate change in particular. He argues that a Trinitarian understanding of creation is required, one that takes all three articles of the Christian creed seriously and that can integrate God's work of creation and salvation. He suggests that the whole of creation (in the sense of *creatura*) is best understood as the object of God's love, which is not confined to humans only. This also implies that God's work of creation (in the sense of *creatio*), preservation and redemption forms a single project of God and not three different projects. He draws on an array of mostly Lutheran sources to make the point that the focus of Trinitarian theology is not on the immanent Trinity (God's substance) but the interrelated gracious movement through which God seeks communion with what God has created. This emphasis on interrelatedness, he argues, is also found in Latin American, Asian and African indigenous traditions.

Christo Lombaard's essay entitled 'First steps into the discipline: On the "spirit" in the discipline of Christian Spirituality' touches on the 'Holy Trinity' only tangentially. The essay's main concern is to help establish the discipline of Christian spirituality studies on a firmer conceptual basis. He argues that although the terms 'spirituality', 'spirit' and 'Holy Spirit' are obviously semantically related, they are not synonymous and that terminological conflation can only lead to confusion. The third person of the Holy Trinity may be assumed as a significant dimension of Christian spirituality, but the main focus of the study of such spirituality is on the dynamic interplay between experience and expression. This may include experiences of the Holy Spirit by individuals and communities expressed in various ways. This essay may thus serve as a barometer of Trinitarian discourse in South Africa only in an inverse way given that its focus is on experience and not so much on the content and significance of the Christian faith.

Daniel Louw contributed an essay entitled 'The perichoresis of an encircling God: Re-interpreting the Rublev icon on Trinity' (leaving a second subtitle aside). As is indicated in the title, he explores the shift in Trinitarian theology from a focus on categories of substance to one based on perichoretic

personal relationships. As a practical theologian, he interprets such relationships in terms of compassion and hospitality to the homeless and strangers, drawing especially on Moltmann's work (which was also the focus of his first doctorate in philosophy) with its theopaschitic emphasis on kenosis. As a practising artist he draws on the Rublev icon to illustrate this more vividly. Although he draws on the *passio Dei* (with its Christological and soteriological focus), he is more concerned with the implications of the immanent Trinity than the economic Trinity.

In an essay ambiguously entitled, 'The (non-)Translatability of the Holy Trinity', Retief Müller, unlike most other contributors, focuses on a particular theological problem, namely, whether an affirmation of Christianity's translatability (affirmed in the African context by Lamin Sanneh) does not undermine the singularity of its Trinitarian confession. He shows how the Cappadocians were able to resolve some confusion on Trinitarian terminology by narrowly defining the Greek term *hypostasis* (from the verb *hyphistamai*, to be present, to exist) and the Latin term *substantia* so that one could *not* be regarded as a translation of the other even though their etymology is similar (standing under). The Nicene solution was that there is only one divine substance (*ousia* or *substantia*) which is realised in different ways in the three divine 'persons' (*hypostases*). Can such fine distinctions be translated in other languages and worldviews? Müller astutely observes that any attempt at translation would be entering a minefield. He explores how this minefield is negotiated by African and some Asian theologians who engage with issues of enculturation, indigenisation and contextualisation (notably James Kombo). He argues that it comes as no surprise that opinion is divided as to whether the notion of the Trinity is translatable even if the gospel itself is deemed 'infinitely translatable'. As a church historian, he may opt out of this debate by focusing on the role of the arcane language of the Trinity in liturgical praxis rather than in doctrinal clarification. He allows for an apophatic emphasis on the Triune God as manifested in lived religion among the vulnerable, especially in Pentecostal contexts, rather than clarified in intellectual circles.

In their article entitled 'God is One', the married partners Willem Oliver and Erna Oliver focus on God's unity and argue that such unity be understood in terms of omnipresence as a characteristic of the Triune God. They discuss various heresies related to God's threefold unity. Their concern is that the one God may be understood as three 'separate' persons so that priority is given to one of the persons while neglecting the others, as if God can be split up. They employ the metaphor of the household of God to understand such omnipresence and offer a survey of biblical texts, patristic texts, ecumenical creeds and 16th-century reformed confessions to support this argument. They conclude that God's unity is entrenched in God's omnipresence: if God can be everywhere at any time, then God can simultaneously be anyone of the three Persons at any time, a position which they (need to) differentiate from modalism.

Johannes Reimer contributed an essay entitled 'Trinitarian spirituality – relational and missional'. Like Louw's contribution, but more extensively, this essay draws on the Rublev icon and on Russian Orthodox spirituality that focuses on the relationships within the immanent Trinity. His essay is best understood as a theological (and homiletical) exposition of the triune mission into the world as a kenotic action. He captures this under a threefold distinction between *missio Patri*, *missio Christi* and *missio Spiritus*. His sophisticated description of the Rublev icon shows that this icon does not carry hierarchical imagery; the three are one in 'total' harmony with each other. Reimer observes that Rublev not only expresses the unity and eternity of the Trinity, but also the differentiations between the three images. The colours employed create the impression of light shining out of each icon, but Christ is clearly at the centre.

In 'The Trinity in African Christian theology: An overview of contemporary approaches', Teddy Sakupapa offers just that, namely, a review of the main trends, key concepts and major proponents in modern (as opposed to patristic) theological discourse on the Trinity in the context of African Christian theology. He explores the translatability of pre-Christian African concepts of God within subsequent Christian reflections to maintain a distinctively Christian doctrine of God (whereas Müller explores the translatability of Christian notions of the Trinity in other languages and cultures). He identifies and describes three phases in this regard: (1) the quest for the theological validity of African concepts of God (see Mbiti's continuity thesis); (2) uncovering the Trinitarian implications of African Christologies of inculturation, liberation and reconstruction with reference to the need for adequate African accounts of Jesus Christ as 'fully divine' and (3) the 'plunge' into theological reflection on the Trinity prompted by ancestral Christology, African notions of relationality and communality, and a retrieval of African ontological categories alike. While his overview is mainly descriptive, he does conclude that there is an apophatic need to recognise that no formula or symbol can fully capture the mystery of God and that, at best, the confession of God as Triune serves as the doxological conclusion of the liturgy.

Dirk van der Merwe, as a New Testament scholar, offers an exposition of how the metaphor of the 'family of God' is developed in the Gospel according to John. The fellowship between God as Father, the Logos as Son of God, believers as children of God and the Spirit as the One, who constitutes the family and educates the children in the family, is thus explored. Four characteristics of such fellowship are identified, namely, in terms of life, love, unity and glorification in the *familia Dei*. Although this emphasis on the family of God is not far removed from the metaphor of the household of God, he does not explore this connection. It may be noted that this metaphor is used extensively in South African ecotheology, often framed in a Trinitarian way (see Ayre & Conradie 2016; Conradie 2015; Diakonia Council of Churches 2006; Kaoma 2013). There is one reference to the household of

God in the second article that he submitted entitled 'The divinity of Jesus in the Gospel of John: The "lived experiences" it fostered when the text was read'.

Henco van der Westhuizen contributed an essay, based on his PhD thesis, entitled 'The Spirit and Salvation'. This is largely a description and to some extent analysis (but not critique) of Michael Welker's Trinitarian understanding of salvation. The focus is therefore on 'the actions of the living God' in terms of creation, maintenance and salvation, that is, the economic Trinity. Welker's 'realistic' theology takes experiences of the Spirit as a point of departure, also within the biblical roots of the subsequent Christian tradition. Such experiences are then interpreted through a Pneumatological and indeed a Trinitarian lens. The Spirit forms a community, that is, a communion with the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. To develop this lens, Van der Westhuizen focuses especially on Welker's understanding of the sacraments, particularly the Holy Communion. He discusses the role of unconditional acceptance, the joy of free self-withdrawal, forgiveness and thanksgiving in relation to the actions associated with distributing, taking, and eating and drinking bread and wine.

Rian Venter offers a learned overview of the recent 'renaissance' of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity, mainly in Western theology. He clearly welcomes this renewed interest in the Trinity with reference to the specific Christian identification of God, the appropriation of insights from the Cappadocian Fathers and the Eastern tradition (in the West), the shift from a substantialist to more relational and communal categories, the role of historical modes of thinking on God's nature and the recognition of the practical significance of the doctrine to address social dilemmas, especially with regard to marginalised voices. He cautions, though, that there are dissenting voices mainly with reference to continuity within the Christian tradition, and the content of ethical and practical appropriations of the doctrine. This often comes from a minimalist position where the emphasis is on the status of Jesus Christ and the Spirit, instead of an elaborate exploration of perichoretic relationships within the immanent Trinity. Accordingly, there needs to be a stricter emphasis on 'Rahner's rule': if the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa, God's identity cannot remain unaffected by the event of the cross. Venter offers some tentative comments with regard to transcendence, narrativity, imagination, analogy and an apophatic spirituality to guide further discourse.

Anné Verhoef's contribution is quite distinct in content and tone. He explores thinking about the Trinity within a poststructuralist context. He engages with authors such as Capputo and Kearney who emphasise the apophatic in seeking to name an unnameable, even an unknowable God. More specifically, he analyses the 'cheerfully blasphemous' film, *The Brand New Testament*, as a 'creative retelling of the Christian story and of the Trinity in a secular and post-metaphysical vein'. The deconstruction and provocative

gendering of the Trinity in this film opens up new ways of imagining God and yields an appreciation of divine characteristics such as love and joy. It is interesting to note that while the focus may be on understanding or deconstructing the (immanent) Trinity, the storyline of the film focuses on the diverse needs for redemption in the lives of each of the 'apostles' (characters in the film) who cannot resolve their problems on their own. In the conversion stories of these apostles, the character of God is revealed.

## How is the public significance of the doctrine of the Trinity assessed within the South African context?

There is some awareness among the contributors that South African discourse on the Trinity needs to be situated as a form of public theology. Few would go as far as Leonardo Boff (1988) in saying that his or her social programme is (or is derived from) the Trinity, but the need to demonstrate contextual relevance is unmistakable. This is especially the case where an emphasis is placed on the social analogy for the Trinity given the emphasis on relatedness, communion and hospitality (see also Vosloo 1999, 2002, 2004). The danger is that one may employ the doctrine of the Trinity in ideological support for a favourite cause without allowing this doctrine a critical function of its own. This suggests the need to maintain some reserve in drawing ethical implications from discussions of the immanent Trinity (see Smit 2009b:75). How, then, is such public significance understood in the contributions to this volume? Let me again capture the gist of each of the contributions very briefly.

J.P. Deetlefs clearly focuses on the political implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. He is aware that monotheism (one supreme authority in heaven) has often been associated with autocratic political rule and legitimising religious violence. He also recognises the claim that a Trinitarian concept of God may instead be employed to promote egalitarian societies on the basis of an emphasis on relationality rather than hierarchy. With his affirmation of both imitation and participation, he resists such an easy correlation but still believes that an understanding of God as triune more readily promotes cooperation and community than monotheism (or henotheism). He draws on some South African authors (Van Wyk, Venter, Vosloo), but surprisingly makes no attempt to make such political implications relevant within the South African context.

Ramathate Dolamo is quite clearly concerned with the public significance of the doctrine of the Trinity with reference to climate change and ecological destruction. His point of departure is not the doctrine of the Trinity, but the world around us interpreted as God's beloved creation. His focus is on the economic rather than the immanent Trinity and then as a lens to explore creation as *creatura*. He understands its ethical significance in terms of concepts such as human rights, gender justice, environmental justice, balance, equilibrium, wholeness, the co-existence of all

creatures, interconnectedness and interdependency. He does not presume that creation will be restored to its presumed former glory, but that rehabilitation (mitigation and adaptation) is still possible.

Although Christo Lombaard's essay hardly addresses the doctrine of the Trinity, it seems clear that the need to recognise the public significance of the Christian confession plays a decisive role here. The emphasis on experience in discourse on spirituality and the generic notion of spirit (or Spirit) allows for common ground with a wide variety of other quests for meaning, if not in the form of institutional religion. In words that Lombaard quotes, 'I'm a deep seeker of meaning and connection; I believe in something bigger than myself, and kindness is my moral center'. Christian spirituality (including its confession of faith in a Triune God) may therefore be acknowledged alongside many other spiritual quests. The polemic thrust of the Christian confession is therefore downplayed.

Daniël Louw clearly sees implications for a Christian ethos, praxis and spirituality in the shift from the attempt of orthodoxy to uphold ecclesial triumphalism (*theologia gloriae*), and an imperialistic ecclesiology of omnipotence, to a theology of vulnerability, suffering and passion (*theologia cruces*). He suggests that the *passio Dei* displays a praxis of compassion (*ta splachna*). On this basis he insists that the healing of civil society is dependent on compassionate acts of being, with an ethos of sacrificial sharing and the beautification (healing) of human frailty. He does not spell out particular implications of that within the South African context, but perhaps there is no need for that in such an essay.

Retief Müller does not address the public significance of Trinitarian categories. In fact, for him such language may well be regarded as arcane, doxological and apophatic. Yet, the question that he raises about the 'infinite translatability' of the Christian gospel is of obvious public significance given debates on religious diversity. Müller recognises that translation is always risky and is threatening to those clinging to orthodox formulations. At the core of such contestations, at least between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, together with the Baha'i faith and Rastafarianism, is indeed the confession of faith in the Triune God. It may be noted that his African conversation partners come from theologies of inculturation and indigenisation, and not so much from black theology, liberation theology and African women's theology, where a different set of issues is raised.

Willem Oliver and Erna Oliver do not explore the social significance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Instead, it seems that their main focus is of a catechetical and liturgical nature, namely, to guard against various heresies that distort the Christian confession and to protect the worship of the 'Holy Trinity'. As an aside, one may note that they consistently use male pronouns for God's unity. They also mention that most languages translate the Hebrew *Yahweh* and the Greek *Kurios*

with singular pronouns and refer to the examples of Afrikaans, Dutch, English, German, Latin and Spanish, but left African terms for the Supreme Being unexplored. One may observe that differences of language, culture, gender and race will influence worship and teaching irrespective of whether these are addressed explicitly or not.

Reimer does not discuss the public significance of the doctrine of the Trinity, except to affirm that the Triune God is a missionary God. He suggests that Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity invites mediation and contemplation in Eucharistic and missional terms. In this way, it remains a source for spiritual inspiration for today. It expresses a spirituality rooted in eternal unity and endless love aiming to reconcile the world with God. This remains highly abstract.

Sakupapa recognises the public significance of attempts to place the symbol of the Triune God in the public sphere (e.g. on the basis of African communality and relationality). However, he argues that the social implications derived from such an emphasis on communion may be read into an understanding of such communion without due cognisance of hierarchical relationships in terms of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation and being able-bodied. He also recognises that discourse on the Trinity is subject to decolonial critiques: colonisation went hand-in-hand with Christian mission with the result that traditional African names for God were transformed into Christian notions of the Triune God. In a recent co-authored article, he therefore raises the question 'whether there is a need for decolonising the doctrine of the Trinity or whether there is a decolonising impulse embedded in the doctrine of the Trinity' (Conradie & Sakupapa 2018).

Van der Merwe does not comment on the public significance of his exposition of fellowship within the family of God. He uses the concept of a Trinitarian spirituality, and presumably the emphasis on life, love, unity and glory would have some ethical implications, at least, for the children of God. Despite the use of family metaphors, he does not make this relevant for the social fabric within the South African society and the quite devastating demise of traditional family structures in many sectors of the society. Instead, he regards the author of the Gospel of John as a prototype of experiencing the divine Trinity intimately. His somewhat odd conclusion is that the doctrine of the Trinity continues to foster new enquiries, continuous research and lived experiences. Christians can never give it up, but find themselves puzzling over it, in an unending process of curiosity, learning and suffering.

In his discussion of Welker's Trinitarian lens for understanding contemporary experiences, Van der Westhuizen does not make this directly relevant in terms of public significance. Admittedly, there is perhaps no need to make explicit what is implicit, for example, in terms of the role of the forgiveness of sins as the 'only possibility to halt sin and its resonance'. He affirms with Welker an emphasis on the public person of

the Holy Spirit and with Smit, his South African mentor, the need for public theology. He follows Smit, by identifying a plurality of perspectives in Trinitarian discourse in South Africa. This includes an emphasis on the 'pastoral purpose' and the 'practical pattern' of a Trinitarian 'grammar' that allows believers to persevere in the midst of experiences of meaningless, senseless destruction and devastation. This 'practical pattern' does not follow the route of deducing ethical consequences from the relationships within the immanent Trinity, but with Smit affirms that the biblical language about the one Living God who is for us, with us and in us will have practical consequences for who we are and what we are called to be.

Venter's overview of Trinitarian discourse in Western theology mentions African reflections on the Trinity (e.g. in terms of ancestral spirits) in a footnote, but does not relate this to the South African context (see Venter 2016 though). However, he clearly recognises the public significance of such debates, for example, with regard to issues around hospitality to strangers, gender and sexual orientation (e.g. with reference to Linn Tonstad). He observes that the Trinitarian grammar provides categories to speak theologically about dilemmas of identity, alterity, unity, diversity and religious plurality. He recognises that the doctrine of God (with its traditional male imagery and subordinant traits) is a site of struggle where subjugated voices on issues of gender, race, class, sexual orientation or physical disability are heard. However, although the doctrine of the Trinity holds 'liberative resources for thinking human authenticity', he does not explore issues related to naming God in a colonial and postcolonial context. In this essay, he also does not relate the emphasis on relationality in Trinitarian discourse to African notions of ubuntu.

Verhoef has a clear eye for the public significance of deconstructing the doctrine of the Trinity. Drawing on Richard Kearney's work, he too hopes to be freed from the 'three-headed monster of metaphysics', namely, the omni-God with characteristics such as omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. He notes that such a notion of God has provoked 'triumphalist teleologies and ideologies of power'. Apparently, he places his hope in philosophy, literature and film to retrieve a more authentic notion of God's identity that will reveal God's loving character in the lives of people.

## What issues, themes and problems are not discussed?

To raise the question as to what issues, themes and problems are not discussed is to assume some template from which an agenda for discourse on the doctrine of Trinity can be drawn. It should be obvious that no such widely accepted template may be found and any proposal in this regard will soon become contested. The reality is that theological reflection on the Trinity shifted from one historical period to the next and from one geographic region to the next. There are obviously marked differences across the various confessional traditions, theological schools and conversation partners.

Given this complexity it is hard enough to make any contribution, while most themes and problems will be left unexplored, even if several volumes of articles were to be published. What is included and excluded very much depends on the interests of the authors who were willing to put in considerable effort to contribute to such a volume. It would be another matter if this was a textbook on the doctrine of the Trinity or perhaps a reader, handbook or companion where the layout can be more carefully planned and then scrutinised.

I will nevertheless offer some reflections on such an agenda and then necessarily from a personal perspective as a scholar standing in the reformed tradition of Swiss, Dutch and German origin, a Euro-African based in South Africa for at least 10 generations (Friedrich Conradi arrived in South Africa from Marburg in Germany in 1685), the descendant of slave owners and also the descendant of quite a few slaves (mostly women), who grew up in the picturesque but highly unequal town of Stellenbosch after my father's death in 1966, who was trained at Stellenbosch University (at that time the intellectual home of the National Party) and since 1993 has been based in a Department of Religion and Theology (where the word 'and' is the most interesting one) at the University of the Western Cape (the leading historically black university in the country, the former 'intellectual home of the left') and who specialises in the intersections between ecotheology, systematic theology and ecumenical theology, with a keen interest in the fields of ethics and discourse on science and theology. I use male pronouns for myself and have been married since 1991 with Marietjie Pauw, a flutist now engaged in artistic research at postdoctoral level. Besides other relatives in four extended families (Conradies, Nels, Pauws and Heeses), colleagues near and far and many students, my identity is also shaped by Pieter (2000-), Hildegard (2003-), Jasmyn (2016-) and Tybalt (2016-), chickens, goldfish and our garden at 13 Swawel Avenue, Stellenbosch, not to forget my grandfather's farm Mierkraal between Bredasdorp and Elim, the Twin Peaks towering over Stellenbosch, the Maltese Cross in the Cedarberg as a beacon for me, and a cottage by the sea in Vleesbaai where the extended Pauw family assembles annually. My desk at home is surrounded by numerous books, the voices of brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, near and far. To what extent all of these may be relevant for an agenda regarding Trinitarian discourse would be for others to comment on. My impression is that theology is shaped by biography, topography and geography, that such self-reflectiveness is needed, also when discussing the doctrine of the Trinity, and that this is sparsely reflected in the contributions to this volume.

As far as I can see (my eyesight is not that good), discourse on the doctrine of the Trinity employs one of three avenues, namely, on the person and identity of God, the work of God, or by using the Trinity as a heuristic lens to explore any other theme found inside or outside the Christian tradition. These three avenues can hardly be separated and then only with



disastrous consequences, but the avenue prioritised does lead to quite distinct lines of inquiry. In each case it is possible to make this relevant for a Christian (or ecclesial) praxis, ethos and spirituality. All three may be regarded as legitimate as long as they are not pursued in isolation from each other.

Following the first line of inquiry, one may say that the doctrine of the Trinity was prompted by the confession in the early church that Jesus, the proclaimed Messiah from Nazareth is 'Kurios' and that the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, is glorified with the Father and the Son. Whenever the doctrine of the Trinity moves too far away from this Christological crux, it ends up in intellectual abstractions. Nowadays, this typically happens in inner-Trinitarian mysticism with its speculation on the perichoretic relationships between the three divine 'persons'. At best the focus should be on the identity and especially the character of naming God in this way, as is distinct from other religious traditions, from the early church onwards. The question is then: who is this God and what kind of god is this? Indeed, what is the meaning of the word 'God'?<sup>1</sup> Is the confession that Jesus is 'truly God' saying something about Jesus or about God or both? Is the point that Jesus is God or that God is (like) Jesus? Is the confession that the Kurios is crucified or that the one who was crucified is the Kurios? This continues to raise questions about the confession that God is named 'Father' (not King, Emperor or Guru), that Jesus Christ is 'Lord' (Chief? President? Director? CEO? Chairperson? Convenor? Conductor? Facilitator?) and the category of 'spirit' (Source? Wind? Power? Ideas? Movement? – see Conradie 2006, 2012b).

Alternatively, following the second line of inquiry, one may focus on the work of the Triune God that is said to be undivided, but that can nevertheless be distinguished once the three 'persons' are identified. The distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity has been in place at least because Irenaeus of Lyons and has been radicalised by Rahner's famous rule that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa, or, in a softer form, that one can say something about who God is only on the basis of how God is revealed to be and therefore from God's work. More precisely, the economic Trinity is the epistemological ground of the immanent Trinity, while the immanent Trinity is the ontological ground of the economic Trinity (see Lee 2009). Or, as Sakupapa drawing on LaCugna has it, *oikonomia* and *theologia* are inseparable. This allows one to speak of the *living* God and to avoid idle speculation (Smit 2009a, 2009b:62, also 2012).

Once such conceptual distinctions have been made, following the third line of inquiry, one can employ that to explore almost

1. The two terms that are most widely used in English to translate Yahweh, Elohim and Theos in the biblical roots of Christianity are 'Lord' (no comment!) and "God". The etymological roots of the latter are contested but may perhaps be traced to the proto-Germanic *guthan*, which is also the source of the Dutch God, the German Gott, the Old Norse *guð*, and the Gothic *gub*). The Online Etymology Dictionary suggests that *guthan* may be derived from the Proto-Indo-European *'ghut-*, meaning 'that which is invoked' – a sense of awe. See <https://www.etymonline.com/word/god> (viewed 20 January 2019).

any other aspect of Christian doctrine, any biblical or theological theme and any social, ethical or pastoral problem in society through such a Trinitarian lens. This approach has been labelled Trinitarian 'spreading' by Oepke Noordmans, also noted by Dirk Smit (2009b:68) and adopted by many South African authors (see also Venter 2008). Or, with Sakupapa, following Robert Jenson, the Trinity is not a separate puzzle to be solved but the framework within which all theology's puzzles are to be solved. This allows for an emphasis on the pastoral, practical, spiritual and liturgical function of Trinitarian language.

Given this sketch and with reference to the set of contributions included in this volume, one may arguably say, with some blurred lines, that Deetlefs, Louw, Oliver and Oliver, Reimer, Sakupapa, Van der Merwe and Venter followed the first avenue with its focus on the immanent Trinity, that Van der Westhuizen (salvation), Verhoef (experiences of conversion) and, to some extent, Dolamo (creation) followed the second avenue with its emphasis on the work of God, and that Dolamo (climate change) and Müller (translating the gospel) followed the third avenue.

In an earlier contribution, provocatively entitled 'Only a fully Trinitarian theology will do, but where can that be found?' (Conradie 2013b), I proposed a threefold agenda for (South African) discourse on the Trinity on this basis, giving a certain preference to the second avenue. The focus was on the relationship between the works of the three 'persons' in the 'Holy Trinity'. This agenda, that is, *my* agenda, may, of course, be contested, but (at least from my perspective) may serve here as the 'needle' of this 'barometer' to indicate where we stand with this volume of contributions.

Firstly, I argued that there is a long-standing failure in Christian theology to do justice to both God's work of creation and of salvation (see Conradie 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2013c, 2015) so that the one is typically subsumed under the other or under another aspect of God's work (ongoing creation, theodicy, incarnation, cross, resurrection, parousia, church, mission, etcetera). One example is the suggestion that the event of the cross *is* the Trinity (see Lee 2009:99). This failure to do justice to both creation and salvation, to both the first and the second article of the Nicene Creed, had devastating consequences for theological reflection on apartheid, but the critique of apartheid hardly does justice to creation theology either (Conradie 2013c). The same underlying problem surfaces in numerous other areas, including theology and science, gender differences, sexual orientation, ecology, race, (African) culture and so forth, also in a theological understanding of the context of the reader in hermeneutics. One cannot address any of these aspects theologically without bringing notions of creation and salvation into play.

Except for the contribution of Dolamo, this is hardly addressed, although Venter and Verhoef show some sensitivity to the ethical issues, if not framed in terms of creation and salvation.

Secondly, I argued that there is an equally long-standing problem regarding the relationship between the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit (see Conradie 2002). Although often framed in terms of the *filioque* controversy, the issue here is the relative independence of the work of the Spirit. Does the Spirit work outside of the presence of Christ, the Word (about Christ), the body of Christ, the sacraments and the ministries and missions of the church? There are deep divides here between the so-called 'mainline' churches of Western origin (where the work of the Spirit remains closely tied to that of Christ) on the one hand, and the Orthodox tradition, Pentecostal churches and a wide range of AICs and other independent churches on the other hand (see Conradie & Klaasen 2014). Likewise, in a range of 'contextual' theologies (African, black, ecological, feminist, liberation, queer), the salvific presence of the Spirit far beyond that of Christ is recognised, prompting questions about the identity of such a Spirit or spirits. This prompted ongoing debate on an all-too masculine controlling of the Spirit versus the need for clarity in discerning the Spirit.

This long-standing and burning controversy, holding together the second and the third article of the Nicene Creed, is crucial for ecumenical relationships in the South African context, but is left untouched in this volume of essays, except for a section in Sakupapa's essay entitled 'The ecumenical significance of the twentieth century renaissance of Trinitarian theology'.

Thirdly, I observed that another set of issues may well concern the relationship between the 'Father' and the work of the Spirit who 'proceeds' (i.e. receives instructions from) as an emissary from the Father. My sense is that this requires reflection on the relationship between Christianity and other religious, spiritual, cultural and ethical traditions to hold together the first and the third articles of the Nicene Creed. This may be less obvious, but the confession of faith in the Triune God from the beginning raised questions about how Christianity is related to Judaism and to the range of other options available throughout the Roman Empire at the time. Obviously, this is also what is at stake in Christian-Muslim dialogue and in the contemporary context marked by both religious pluralism and secularism.

Again, although Müller touches on this set of problems, it is largely left unexplored in this volume of essays. Lombaard does address the relationship between Christian spirituality and other quests for meaning, but then by deliberately bracketing the Holy Spirit as the third person of the 'Holy Trinity' to avoid conceptual confusion between the terms spirituality, spirit and Holy Spirit.

As I argued in the above-mentioned contribution, following a famous essay by Arnold Van Ruler on 'The necessity of a Trinitarian theology' (in 1989:1–26), if these three sets of issues are not addressed, if no emerging ecumenical consensus can be found in this regard, it remains facile to claim that any theology is truly 'Trinitarian'. Put simply, any individual theological construct that is not ecumenically

tested and digested cannot be Trinitarian. Indeed, only a fully Trinitarian theology will do, but that is harder to find than what those opting for a shortcut to reflect on the immanent Trinity are willing to acknowledge. Van Ruler (1989:1) comments that he has not found such a Trinitarian theology in the entire Christian theological tradition, suggests that Calvin approached that most closely and admits that he is not able to offer anything approximating that. I hold that this still applies, despite the astonishing recent renaissance of Trinitarian theology and notwithstanding the merits of the contributions in this volume.

The same may apply to liturgical praxis: it is possible to confess faith in a Triune God but apophatic theology (also recognised by Sakupapa) reminds us that this can, at best, be an approximation that has to cover many sins and theological failures. In my view, the Christian naming of God as Triune is best regarded not as a point of departure or even as a framework for theological debates, but as a doxological conclusion (see Rossouw 1973), a word where words dry up, where only music can take us further, to be followed by the sound of sheer silence.

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