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Faith in the Triune God

Abstract

This contribution illuminates basic thoughts of the ecclesial trinitarian doctrine in the perspective of Western theology. It names critical questions from other monotheistic religions, but also from so called common sense of modernity. It shows that a Christological foundation of the Trinitarian doctrine can even be deepened, when the biblical witnesses on creation are clearly perceived.

Keywords

Trinitarian theology, Christological and biblical foundation of Trinitarian theology, Doctrine of Creation and Trinity, the sustaining, saving and ennobling God.

For almost two thousand years, nearly all Christians have believed in the “triune God” (the Trinity). This belief has not been “based” simply upon the many trinitarian greetings and blessings found in the letters of Paul, nor is it grounded in Jesus’ own great commission to baptize all nations “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28.19). Faith in the “triune God” is based rather upon an insight

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which crystallized within the earliest stage of the church, during the 40s of the first century, an insight that is visible in almost all the texts of the New Testament: namely, that in the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1.24) are revealed in such a way that Christ himself is to be worshipped and praised as God and “Lord” (*kyrios*). God revealed himself not only in the earthly and mortal humanity of Jesus Christ; rather Jesus Christ is also “God from God”, eternal, existing before all times, the firstborn over all creation, and at work in creation and the new creation (Col 1.15ff; Heb 1.2f; Jn 1.1ff). In the power of the Holy Spirit, the Father and Son are bound together in the unity of the Godhead. Both in and by the power of the Holy Spirit, they rule over, renew, save and elevate that creation.

This confession regarding God’s trinitarianly differentiated unity and uniqueness is very difficult to understand and presents not only an intellectual hurdle but also a barrier to inter-religious dialogue, particularly with other “monotheistic” religions. The church’s teaching on the Trinity does not attempt to hide these difficulties. On the contrary, these difficulties are exposed in the uncertainty surrounding our choice and use of key conceptual terms: Should we speak of one divine being in three persons or one personal Divinity in three ways of being? Each conceptual option has its share of strengths and weaknesses. Either the differentiation in God is emphasized so strongly that we can no longer adequately testify to God’s unity, or the stress falls so heavily on the unity of God that it blurs the trinitarian differentiation.

The classical teachings of the church have primarily sought to defend the theology of the Trinity against accusations of tritheism (the worshiping of three gods): “We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.” The Athanasian Creed, written between the end of the fourth century and sixth century, offers a perfect example of the church’s teaching on the Trinity. The Father is uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, almighty; the Son is uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, almighty; the Holy Spirit is uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, almighty. And yet we are not dealing with three Uncreateds, Incomprehensibles, Eternals and Almighties, but rather a *single* uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal and almighty God. “In this Trinity, none is afore or after another; none is greater or lesser than another. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal.”

Since the time of John of Damascus (675–c.749), a term from the field of choreography has been used in an attempt to understand this unity of the triune God: namely, *perichoresis* or “the mutual interpenetration,

participation and unification of differing and still distinguishable entities”¹. The unity of God is a perichoretic unity in which God’s persons or ways of being penetrate into one another, and where this lived unity and shared work find their life and efficacy. This has led some to speak of a “social unity,” to call for a “social doctrine of the Trinity” and to search within such a doctrine for a model of perfect community between all persons and creatures.²

Following 1 John 4.16 (“God is love”) and John 1.1 (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”), the connection to love, or to the God who reveals himself in the Word has also been picked up in the development and explication of the doctrine of the Trinity. The loving Father relates to the loved Son in a “bond of love” which is the Holy Spirit (Augustine, Barth). Or: “We Christians say: This one Lord, King and Creator echoes himself through the Son, so that within the Godhead the Word is spoken by the Father, and the Holy Spirit assents to it. In this way there is three, and yet in God himself just one”³.

In these ways, attempts have been made to understand the self-differentiation as well as the self-relation of God within the internal dimensions of his inner, divine life (immanent Trinity). Yet this has not been driven by some desire for precarious speculations, but is an attempt to clarify that God, in all his divine, external works (economic Trinity) was not coerced by foreign forces or compulsions but rather only expressed what God “was, already in himself”⁴. Thus the theology of the Trinity seeks to grasp and express nothing less than the objectivity and freedom of divine revelation.

We reach an even deeper basis to the doctrine of the Trinity when we connect insights into its Christological foundation with a clear understanding of the biblical creation narratives. Yet here we need critically to question any simple, theistic understanding of creation which would see God, for example, as an “all-determining reality” or the “ground of being.” According to the classical creation narratives, God distributes to all creatures (in a differentiated way) a share in the work of creation: the heavens divide; the sun, moon and stars rule; the earth brings forth; and human beings receive the commission either to rule over their fellow creatures and reflect the image of God to them (Gen 1) or to cultivate and protect the earth (Gen 2). Even though (according to Gen 1) the Creator

¹ E. Jüngel, Art. Perichorese, in: RGG 4 Bd. 6, pp. 1109-1111.

² J. Moltmann, *Trinität und Reich Gottes. Zur Gotteslehre* (Munich: Kaiser, 1980), pp. 20f.216f.

³ M. Luther, Predigt 25. XII. 1541, cf. K. Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik, Bd. 1, Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes* (sub-volume 1, Munich: Kaiser, 1932), p. 404ff.

⁴ K. Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, p. 404ff.

sees the world established in this way as “good” (Hebrew *tob*, i.e. life-supporting), it is not paradise. Connected to this empowerment of the creatures is the risk of their own self-endangerment and possible self-destruction. Thus the life-supporting, structuring work of God, which has called creation into life, also needs God’s guiding and salvific action in order to demonstrate the fullness of God’s creativity. The God testified to in the Bible is not a theistic “autocrat” who winds up the entire universe like an immense clock and then keeps it running.

The God testified to in the Bible respects the creative, and yet also possibly destructive freedom of his creatures. The salvific work of God—revealed in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit—is not merely a series of attempted repairs or “touch-ups” on what still remains (despite its powers and impotence, its strengths and frailties) a “life-supporting” creation. While never ceasing to support this creation in its freedom, the Triune God works toward the transformation and elevation of all creatures into “members of the new creation.” God seeks to gain all creatures for the divine kingdom. They should be formed after the image of Christ, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and receive a share in the eternal life of God. This differentiated divine action which sustains, saves and elevates creation takes into account the doctrine of the Trinity, within the scope of teaching on the economic Trinity. Although the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are at work together in all the creative, redemptive and salvific works of the Triune God (*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*), the differing dimensions of this work and their vital interconnections can only be understood clearly when approached from the perspective of a trinitarian differentiation.

Texts

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