IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT: TOWARD A TRANSCULTURAL TRINITARIAN WORLDVIEW

Scott Horrell
Professor of Theological Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

Introduction

Broadly across Christian traditions today, the renaissance of Trinitarian studies continues to yield productive directives regarding the practical implications of faith in the tripersonal God.[1] Some ideas align fairly readily with classical Christian faith, others appear more distant from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as historically interpreted—whether in the East or the West.

---

[1] Recent Trinitarian contributions include: Allan Coppedge, *The God Who Is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007); Peter Drilling, *Premodern Faith in a Postmodern Culture: A Contemporary Theology of the Trinity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); John F. Fish, ed., *Understanding the Trinity (*Dubuque, IA: ECS Ministries, 2006); Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-Ontology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the* Imago Dei (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008); Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004); Bruce L. McCormack, ed., *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008); Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, trans. Philip Milligan and Linda M. Cicone (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007) William C. Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler, eds., *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007); Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005); F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Tom Smail*, Like Father, Like Son: The Trinity Imaged in Our Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker, eds. *God's Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006); Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).

On the one hand, church fathers and moderns alike admonish us to beware of over speculation regarding the Godhead, of trying to say too much about what cannot be said. The apophatic nature of Trinitarian confession reminds us that creeds exist both to define the boundaries and to preserve the mystery of the transcendent God. As William Placher comments: "We are asking about the very essence of God, and that essence is too great for our understanding. We must cling closely to Scripture and to the logic of salvation, flickering candles as it were against what seems such a great darkness but is in fact, of course, invisible to our mind's eyes because of the brilliance of its too great light."[2]

On the other hand, even as creedal language helps guard what can finally never be said, God has spoken in the Son and by the Spirit, through acts in history and in the written Word. The very center of the biblical message is that the triune God comes to us and makes known his personal richness,[3] whether in mercy or in judgment. We are invited to know this God through Christ and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds through the Spirit. That some things *can* be said about the Christian God in ways that can and should unite all believers is the theme of this paper.

The purpose of this article is to outline a transcultural Trinitarian worldview, one that attempts to set forth a universal framework of basic Christian faith for believers today. The different sections are meant as suggestions in the process of developing what it means for Christian believers to think about God and our human reality. It presupposes that the biblical basis and historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity are essentially and correctly expressed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Rather than a detailed discussion of any

---

[2] Placher, *The Triune God*, 139.

[3] While recognizing that the transcendent God is beyond gender, and while admitting occasional feminine language and metaphors for God (notably the Spirit), I will use masculine pronouns for God both as one and as three, consonant with normative Scripture and tradition. See the mature balance of Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999) 183-91.

single aspect, the work is designed to be a rather simple synthesis of important Trinitarian themes. The overview traces the Godhead's internal relationships from before creation, then discusses how Christians might think about God in relation to the physical universe, to themselves, and to others created in the image of God. Furthermore, themes of divine love, holiness, and redemption are contrasted to non-Christian perspectives. In the penultimate section I posit several basic formulations about God, time, and space. The paper concludes with two observations.

Hence, these aspects of Trinitarianism are designed to form a biblical-theological superstructure that helps unify varying contextualized Christian perspectives of faith.[4] Integrated into the work is the argument that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity with its broad-sweeping and extraordinary implications for human existence may be powerful apologetic for Christian faith amidst the cultures of the world. As the late Colin Gunton exclaimed,

> It is part of the pathos of Western theology that it has often believed that while trinitarian theology might well be of edificatory value to those who already believe, for the outsider it is an unfortunate barrier to belief, which must therefore be facilitated by some non-trinitarian apologetic, some essentially monotheistic 'natural theology.' My belief is the reverse: that because the theology of the Trinity has so much to teach about the nature of our world and life within it, it is or could be the centre of Christianity's appeal to the unbeliever, as the good news of a God who enters into free relations of creation and redemption with his world. In the light of the theology of the Trinity, everything looks different.[5]

---

[4] Various efforts have been made to collate international Trinitarian perspectives or again to relate Christianity through a Trinitarian lens to non-Christian religions, but to my knowledge, no direct effort has focused on a transcultural Trinitarian worldview. See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004); Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004); also Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2000); S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Raimundo Pannikar, *The Trinity and the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY, 1973); Aída Besançon Spencer and William David Spencer, eds. *The Global God: Multicultural Evangelical Views of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998); and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Diversity* (Nashville, KY: Abingdon, 2003).

[5] Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 7.

Any such framework calls for considerable humility before the mystery of God. Again, apophatic or negative theology—the theology of not-knowing—surely has its place. Yet equally essential for a basic Trinitarian worldview is the open-armed working together of international Christians in critiquing, correcting, and nuancing what is set forth. Theology on the macro-structural level is necessarily a communitarian and international dialogue.

I. THE TRINITY BEFORE CREATION

Tertullian wrote, "before all things God was alone, being his own universe, location, everything. He was alone, however, in the sense that there was nothing external to himself."[6] Before any and all creation, it must be said that God was completely self-sufficient and all-inclusive. All that existed was God. There was nothing that was not God. Zwingli opined, "Since we know that God is the source and creator of all things, we cannot conceive of anything before or beside him which is not also of him. For if anything could exist which was not of God, God would not be infinite."[7] In the absolute beginning, God was everything.

This Supreme Being is infinite[8] in each of his characteristics. Rather than envelop all opposites (for unlike pantheism God is not infinite in everything), the God of the Bible in his perfect nature eternally chooses to be himself. That is, God is pure and consistent in being— good and not evil, holy and not unholy, immutable and not ever-changing. And God is free. He is what he is, then, both by nature and by choice.

The God who resides outside our dimensions cannot be exhaustively comprehended. He can be known in part yet he stands beyond us in mystery. Any true understanding we have of the transcendent God derives from God's gracious revelation given in finite categories and

---

[6] Tertullian (d. ca. 225), *Adversus Praxean*, 5.
[7] Zwingli, "An Exposition of the Faith," in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (London: SCM Press, 1953) 249.
[8] The term "infinite" is best understood as limitless or endless; impossible to measure; greater than any assignable quantity, thus beyond the realm of knowing; therefore to speak of God and God's attributes as infinite is especially to raise it beyond human conception.

conditions that have meaning for us as finite beings. Nevertheless, what God has revealed of

himself is fully sufficient to know and to love him.

Moreover, the Supreme Being is profoundly personal. "Though alone" before creation,

Hippolytus remarks, "he was multiple."[9] God reveals himself as three eternally distinct persons.

Whereas functions differ, each person is shown to be equally God in essence and unity.[10] The

shared glory, love, and communication of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit forever

distinguish the one Christian God from all other forms of theism. Thus, the persons of the Trinity

can be known together as one yet also identified distinctly and worshiped.

We conclude that the divine Being, before any and all creation, existed as all-inclusive,

self-sufficient, and tripersonal, as expressed in the high concept of Trinity.

II. TRINITY AND IMPERSONAL CREATION

Although some suppose a created order that is co-eternal in the past with God, classical

Christian faith declares that creation has been called into existence out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).

There was an absolute beginning.[11] When God created, therefore, he deliberately chose to limit

himself. While yet fully infinite, God now created something that was not himself. In creating

something out of absolute nothing, God no longer remained all-inclusive.[12] The rock, the tree,

and the animal were not God. In contrast to all pantheistic theologies, the God of the Bible did

---

[9] Hippolytus, *Contra Noetum*, 10.

[10] As to the intra-Trinitarian relationships, in creedal language, the Son is *eternally begotten* of the Father and the Holy Spirit *eternally proceeds* from the Father and (in the West) the Son. The words *begotten* and *proceeding* do not denote inferiority of one person relative to another but simply shed light on the relational differences between the three. The words *essence* and *person* are notoriously difficult to define, nor is there consensus as to their precise meanings. For discussion see my "Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order," *JETS* 47:3 (Sept 2004) 399-421.

[11] Note John 1:1-3; Rom 11:36; Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:2; 11:3; Rev 3:14.

[12] The notion of God creating space within himself for creation is seen in various historical thinkers: Isaac Luria's *zimsum* or self-limitation of God (mystical Judaism), Nicholas de Cusa, and F. W. J. Schelling. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik* II, Part 1 (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1983); Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983) 376-96; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (5th ed., New York: Harper, 1996) 108-111; more extensively Moltmann, *God in Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper, 1985).

not flow or emanate out into the physical world.[13] To the contrary, all space, energy, and matter exist as God's creation and artistry and not as his essence, but the existence of these dimensions is wholly sustained by the personal Creator. As Thomas Finger observes, "Yet radical as this self-giving, self-emptying process is, the Trinitarian God remains distinctly *other*. God's intertwining with creatures thus evokes heightened wonder, for it proceeds not from natural necessity—not because we already are God's body—but from grace."[14]

The question of *why* God created is not easily answered, although classical Christian faith responds in the final sense "to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:12-13). Many surmise that the divine motivation for creation is best found in the overflow of loving self-givingness between the three persons of the Godhead. The deep love and joyful relations among the members of the Trinity is manifested in the creation of that which is *other*—especially other personal beings that might know and enjoy relationship, service, and worship of this God.

Summarily, the triune God brought the created order into existence out of nothing. He sustains it and in that sense is personally related to all dimensions of existence.

III. TRINITY AND THE UNITY-DIVERSITY OF THE UNIVERSE

The tension between unity and diversity in the universe is one of the great philosophic problems of history. Since the ancient philosophers, humanity has lacked a solution to this enigma. Is reality constituted by one single cosmic principle (Fate or God) that unites and determines all

---

[13] Some theologians propose an actual or eschatological pan*en*theism where creation is *in* God but God is more than the finite universe; for some, God is said to incarnate hypostatically (or perichoretically) in the world. Process theology assumes panentheism. Other voices include Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of the Matter*, trans. Rene Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 15-102; Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis NY, 1988), 230-31; in part, Jürgen Moltmann, "The World in God or God in the World?" in *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 35-41.

[14] Thomas Finger, "Modern Alienation and Trinitarian Creation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17:2 (April 1993) 204.

existence? Or is ultimate reality centered in diversity in which the particulars are self-determinative, whether by choice or by chance?

At the pole of unity, one is locked in cosmic determinism. Whether religious or secular, I am but a tiny cog within a massive machine over which I have no control and in which I have no basis for choice or personal meaning. Such a perspective is evident in the religious fatalism of ancient Greek religion, Vedanta Hinduism, traditional Islam ("If-God-wills"), and Christian predestinationism. Similar perspectives—especially regarding what it means to be human—surface in secular forms of behavioral psychology, biological science, and Marxism's dialectic materialism.

At the opposite pole, that of diversity, all existence is composed of particulars with no ultimate unifying Being or telos. "We make ourselves." Without God I am free. Yet while I might be "free," I am without any referent beyond myself for meaning. As a person floating in outer space, I have neither spacecraft nor planet in sight and two hours of oxygen before I die. From Kandinsky and Dadaism to Basquiat, Cy Twombly, and Cindy Sherman, Western twentieth-century art reveals the angst of being one's own god in a meaningless universe. Secular existentialism was grounded in individual autonomy. Socio-political theory assumed collective autonomy. And, with nothing beyond ourselves, the two—individual and collective autonomy—have coalesced in contemporary postmodernism.

Outside of biblical Christianity, there is no structure that finally satisfies the tension between the one and the many. As three persons in one God, the Trinity incorporates both unity and diversity within itself. Apart from direct revelation, explains Cornelius Van Til, we could never know that God exists tripersonally. But that being revealed, we surely can understand "that the unity and the plurality of this world has [in] back of it a God in whom unity and the plurality

are equally ultimate."[15] Creation reflects this unity-diversity from the immensity of outer space with its hundred billion galaxies to the complexity of inner space with sub-atomic bosons, leptons, and fermions. Whether vastly expansive or fathomlessly small, there is order between individual components and the total scheme of creation.

In the end, if there is no infinite, absolute point of reference in the universe, then all of the particulars are meaningless. What is more, if such a point of reference is to give real significance to all existence, it must be a personal Absolute. In contrast with all other religions and philosophies, the concept of the Holy Trinity presents a meaningful relationship between the one and the many in the universe. Every thing and every person has real significance because it was created by and exists related to the triune God.

IV. TRINITY AND THE BEGINNING OF PERSONAL CREATION

Besides space, time and matter, the triune God chose to create other *persons*. By creating finite beings God limited himself again. No longer was God the only moral and spiritual agent in existence. Unlike God himself, all created beings are finite, whether in heaven or on earth. In contrast to God the Son, for example, Satan is not capable of being present in all places at all times, rather he extends his kingdom through his minions. In creating finite persons, the God of the Bible remained infinite but he was no longer morally and will-fully all-inclusive; now a personal being could choose against him.

---

[15] Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar (2d ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007) 364-65; see Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Contrary to the atheist and the pantheist, the Judeo-Christian affirms that human personhood and dignity is grounded in the *imago dei*. While more ample than these aspects,[16] *personhood* surely includes the simple elements of thought, volition, and emotion: (1) God thinks and reasons in a logical manner, although not necessarily in the same thought patterns that we use[17]; (2) God chooses voluntarily and possesses freedom of will[18]; and (3) God manifests a multiplicity of affections—all as a moral, purposeful Being. Just as Scripture establishes that each member of the Godhead reasons, exercises volition, and manifests a plurality of feelings, so we as finite persons evince similar characteristics. Other aspects of the divine image appear to include creativity, aesthetic appreciation, moral conscience, aptitude for dominion, a sense of immortality, and desire and capacity for I-thou relationships. Therefore, although human beings have fallen into sin and suffer the defects of the fall, the *imago dei* is not disfigured beyond recognition. We are truly persons with eternal value because the Creator and Absolute of the universe is also personal. And God has come to us in Jesus Christ, the express image and manifestation of God.

In sum, Trinitarianism argues that neither atheism nor pantheism has a sufficient framework for explaining our humanness—the full-bodied "humanness" presumed worldwide through literature, music, and common life. Nor in general does Islamic theism teach that human beings are created in the image of God, rather we are creatures made to serve but not to

---

[16] Helpful works include Leslie Stevenson and David L. Haberman, *Ten Theories of Human Nature* (4th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005); Kenneth Boa, *Augustine to Freud: What Theologians and Psychologists Tell Us about Human Nature* (Nashville, KY: Broadman & Holman, 2004); J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The* Imago Dei *in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005); and J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis of Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). Three views regarding the *imago dei* are common: the substantialist, relational, and functional; all may be instructive in approaching the plenitude of what is human.

[17] Ironically, given the Enlightenment, human reason itself is an enigma in twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy, often perceived as pragmatic in utility and bound within arbitrary factors of genetics, culture, and language. Conversely, most Christians affirm that the principles of rationality ground in God's own character.

[18] Choice or "free-will" is another phenomenon without adequate explanation in the non-theistic world, despite the fact that existentialism and humanism presuppose individual volition as foundational to their systems.

fellowship with Allah. In Christianity, the doctrine of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the structure and ontological grounding for the realities of our own personhood: our self-consciousness, rationality (including language), self-determinative choices, plethora of affections and emotions, sense of afterlife, moral sensibilities of right and wrong, and our capacity for relationships with God and with other human beings. In Trinitarian faith, our humanity has found its home.

V. TRINITY AND HUMANITY IN COMMUNITY

The doctrine of the Trinity yields further light for the individual in social relationships. From eternity past, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit appear united in communication, fellowship, and love, thus in a plenitude of interpersonal relationships.[19] In the secular world, many declare that human relationships exist only to serve our selfish interests, that "love" is simply the product of biological hormones,[20] and that language is a tool of manipulation. No longer are such attitudes merely oriented to the North Atlantic. From Beijing to Buenos Aires many find life without significance. The words of Bob Dylan bemoan the hopelessness of a tired, adult humanity, "I used to care, but things have changed."

In the midst of anti-humanitarian affirmations, the Christian faith proclaims that communication, friendship, and love—all central human desires—assume profound meaning when we understand that humankind was created by a Godhead that manifests social relations within itself. From conception and birth, to language and cultural formation, to values acquisition,

---

[19] For biblical evidence of intra-Trinitarian relations see Horrell, "The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity," in Sanders and Issler, eds., *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, 44-79.

[20] Richard Dawkins declares: "We are machines built by DNA whose purpose is to make more copies of the same DNA…This is exactly what we are for. We are machines for propagating DNA, and the propagation of DNA is a self-sustaining process. It is every living object's sole reason for living." "Growing Up in the Universe," cited by Joel Green, "Body and Soul, Mind and Brain: Critical Issues," in *In Search of the Soul: Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem,* eds. Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005) 7.

to our physical daily well-being (if not survival), we are dependent upon social relations. We are created for community. Yet a human being is not three persons but one person. Whereas God as Trinity is self-sufficient, we are not. Created as individuals, we are made, so to speak, for a trinity of relationships—with self, other human beings, and the Lord God. As creatures rather than Creator, we are not designed to presume ourselves all knowing, to attain ultimate perspective, or to be in the center of our universe. A person is designed to trust in and to enter into fellowship with the triune God.

If God is three persons in relationship and if I am created to reflect or *image* my Maker, then I have every reason to enter into full human relations: to work with others for the good of all; to engage in reasoned thought and communication; to enjoy objective study of science, history, and other disciplines of learning; to create and participate within the visual arts and music; to express emotions of joy, sadness, and anger as positively as possible in my personal associations; to pursue and develop friendships in healthy, appropriate ways; to value social connections around the births, marriages, anniversaries, and deaths of others; to delight in sexual intimacy in marriage (which reflects the covenantal nature of God's own unity, hence to be guarded as sacred); to be zealous for justice and compassion among those laden by poverty, oppression, hardship, and sin; to care for our earth over which we remain vice-regents. This is not to deny a fallen world with the surd that separates and destroys believers and unbelievers alike. Rather it is to say that as Christians we have a structure for being persons-in-relation in the world and, all the more, in the context of the believing community, the church. [21]

---

[21] Explorations of these themes include: Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*; Donald Macleod, *Shared Life: The Trinity and the Fellowship of God's People* (Fern, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1994); Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theology of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ian A. McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity* (New York:

Thus the Christian faith leads us to the depths of our humanity. Made in God's likeness, now forgiven and reborn, the more we become like Jesus Christ (the perfect *imago dei*) the more we reflect the wondrous personal glory of God. True Christianity does not erase the person nor is it careless toward community—in contrast to many forms of pantheism and atheism. To the contrary, biblical faith leads the Christian to full personhood in relationship with others. One asks, what human being in all of history compares to Jesus of Nazareth in his purity, magnetism, and ardent relations with others? That which we see in the humanity of the Last Adam corresponds to the ontology of every human being, an ontology that is awakened and renewed through faith in the Savior.

VI. TRINITY, LOVE, JUSTICE, AND FORGIVENESS

A central characteristic of the God of the Bible is love. Love is pristinely manifest in the relationship between the Father and the Son (John 17:23-24), and further in God's sacrificial love for the world (1 John 4:7-10).[22] Defined in 1 Corinthians 13, *agape* is not directed inwardly but outwardly in the sharing and giving of oneself to others. In contrast to Islam, Judaism, and other religions that insist God exists exclusively as one person, the triune God of Christianity is not egocentric, solitary, or isolated.[23] Richard of St. Victor wrote, "It is never said of anyone that

---

Paragon House, 1994); Ouellet, *Divine Likeness;* Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God;* Smail*, Like Father, Like Son;* Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); various articles in Volf and Michael Welker, eds. *God's Life in Trinity*; Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*; and John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

[22] D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000) 17-21, articulates five biblical dimensions of God's love: intra-Trinitarian love between the Father and the Son; providential love toward all he has made; salvific love toward the fallen world; effective, elective love toward the elect; and conditioned love toward obedient believers.

[23] Brian Hebblethwaithe, "Perichoresis—Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Theology* 80:676 (July 1977) 257 states: "If personal analogies are held to yield some insight into the divine nature (perhaps because man is supposed to be made in the image of God), then there can be no doubt that the model of a single individual person does create difficulties for theistic belief. It presents us with a picture of one who, despite his infinite attributes, is unable to enjoy the excellence of personal relation, unless he first creates an object for his love. Monotheistic faiths have not favoured the idea that creation is necessary to God, but short of postulating personal relation in God, it is

he possesses charity because of the exclusively personal love that he has for himself—for there to be charity, there must be a love that is directed towards another. Consequently where there is an absence of a plurality of persons, there cannot be charity."[24] The tripersonal God does not need to create something or someone to love. For God to be "love," he must exist as at least two persons.

As Jesus Christ revealed the attributes of God and taught us to follow him (Luke 9:23-25), it is by giving of ourselves in love to others that we are further made into the *imago dei*. A fundamental principle for being human is that the more we strive to give of ourselves, first to God and then to others, the more fulfilled we are as personal beings. In sacrificially loving others, we imitate the persons of the Trinity—the Father as he gives "all things" to the Son (John 16:15; 17:10), the Son as he obeys the Father (John 5:30; 8:29; Phil 2:8) and having conquered lays all things back at the feet of the Father (1 Cor 15:27-28), and the Spirit as he selflessly glorifies the Son and the Father (John 16:13-15). This divine self-givingness within God's personal plurality serves as our model, first in our response to God himself, but secondarily in our social relationships whether in the family, local church, or at any other sociological level.

Just as God is love, so he is holy. The only attribute thrice repeated in both Testaments is the *trisagion,* the seraphs' cry of "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD [God] Almighty" (Isa 6:3; cf. Rev 4:8). But how does God's holiness and love work? God is the absolute moral standard of all existence; all ethical law and justice is directly derived from his moral purity. How can holy justice coexist with divine mercy if sin should enter the relations? (And with humankind it most

---

difficult to see how they can avoid it. There does seem to be something of an impasse here for Judaism and Islam. Hinduism, at least in its more philosophical forms, avoids this problem by refusing to push the personal analogies right back into the absolute itself. The personal gods of Hindu devotional religion are held by the philosophers to be personifications at a lower level of reality of the one absolute being, beyond all attributes. (Hence, incidentally, the so-called Hindu Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva is no real analogue for the Christian Trinity)."

[24] Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), *De Trinitate*, 1.20.

surely has!) If God were *mono*-personal he could be perfectly just and holy, but he would be equally unable to forgive sin without violating his own justice.

In Islam's *Hadith* (the sayings of Mohammed), Allah stands above the bridge that passes from this earthly life to the afterlife of paradise. Underneath this bridge that is "as narrow as the edge of a sword" is the burning abyss of hell.[25] Every Muslim admits he is not morally perfect as Allah is perfect; he can only cast himself on divine mercy. But in Islam there can be no assurance of God's mercy. Allah does whatever he chooses, he is free. All Muslims believe God does forgive, but the question is how? A man who lived a life ninety percent good and ten percent evil might be granted paradise. A person with less virtue might be pushed into the abyss. But no one knows what Allah will do (yet whatever he does is necessarily "good"). The point is, assuming that no one is perfect as God is perfect, Allah must compromise pure justice to permit mercy in order that anyone at all enter Paradise.[26] And if Allah compromises justice he is no longer the Moral Absolute of the universe; he is no longer perfect.

Conversely, the New Testament declares that God is both the Just and Justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Rom 3:23-26). In that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," neither works of the law nor acts of righteousness remove our judgment. Rather, precisely because God is *more than one* person, this God can both demand absolute justice and he himself pay the price that he requires. Because of the plurality of persons, the triune God can be the Holy Judge, the sacrificial Lamb who satisfies divine justice, and the sanctifying Spirit who works within me (even when a sinner) to lead me to God and to make me his child.

---

[25] Note Sura 19:68-71, sometimes termed "the Bridge Sirat" over which all must pass to their eternal destiny; nevertheless, the bridge is not explicitly described in the Qur'an. The great majority, but not all Muslims, accept the Hadith as authoritative.

[26] *Allah* is the Arabic Christian term for God from well before Mohammed; here it employed as the God of Islam. Muslims leave the paradox of divine justice and mercy in transcendent mystery.

VII. TRINITY, TIME, AND SPACE

In forming a transcultural Trinitarian worldview, the most speculative realm is that of God in relation to time and space. Yet certain tentative observations can be set forth that reflect historical Christian thought.

Unlike the cyclical concept of time in classical pantheism and some forms of animism, the biblical perspective of time is linear: the history of the world has beginning, direction, culmination, and (in some sense) end. For this reason, more than any other religion, Judeo-Christianity has large numbers of predictive prophecies—by one well-known estimate over one quarter of the Bible.[27] The Christian faith takes objective history seriously as demonstrated in the incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and second coming of Jesus Christ (*cf*. 1 Cor 15:3-27). God enters creational time and space dynamically relating with human beings. Simultaneously this same sovereign God is transcendent, in some sense existing outside of his creation.[28]

Seen from a biblical viewpoint, time and creation have a beginning but they have no end. The physical order was created and will continue in some form forever. This is the covenant that the triune God has made with personal creation. The regenerate person is made heir to everlasting life, having herself a beginning but no end. This does not mean that she becomes eternal in the same sense that the transcendent God is eternal, rather she will live forever in some form of linear time (*cf*. Rev 22:2). Believers are given "eternal life"—a life filled with the

---

[27] J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and Their Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973) 681, puts the figure at 27 percent. My comment does not deny that Islam and traditional Judaism have multiple prophecies.

[28] The church fathers struggled with the concept of eternity as do Christian philosophers today. Some defend that God exists in time as do we, others that God in his transcendence exists outside of time. Augustine suggested that time was created along with the universe (*The City of God* XI, 6). Overviews of current perspectives are found in Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff, eds., *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). See also William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001); Garrett J. DeWeese, *God and the Nature of Time* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004); Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

plenitude of the Lord, a life of elevated quality—but always within some form of time and space (1 John 5:11-12). Although the nature of future existence is different from the present, the fundamental dimensions of time and space will in some way remain, as they seem essential to the existence of finite beings.

Furthermore, in Christian tradition God the Son has forever assumed a bodily human nature (John 1:14), although that in no way confines his deity.[29] The Holy Spirit, likewise, is manifested as a dove and tongues of fire. And if not merely metaphorical, some language of Scripture suggests that even God the Father appears in finite forms within the order of creation (*i.e.*, the Ancient of Days, Dan 7:9-10). Popular conceptions of heaven include some kind of appearance of the Father ("him who sits on the throne," Rev 4:9,10), while mainline theological understandings affirm him as exclusively immortal, invisible, "whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:15).[30] However conceived, by God's entering our world—principally in the Incarnation of the Son and by the ever-active Spirit—we can understand and relate to God in tangible ways. Indeed, if the infinite God did *not* reveal himself in words and appearances analogous to our reality, then we would be without categories to understand and relate to him. Whenever God reveals himself it is by grace and condescension.

---

[29] Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 17: "The Word was not confined within the body; neither was he there and no place else; he did not activate that body and left the universe devoid of his activity and orientation. Here is the supreme wonder. He was the Word and nothing confined him; rather he himself contained all things. He is in the whole creation, and yet in his essential being he is distinct from all else. Likewise, when he was in human bodily form, he himself gave life to that body; and at the same time, he was giving life to the entire universe and was present in all things; yet he was distinct from the universe and outside of it."

[30] Some passages emphasize the invisibility of God (John 1:18, 4:23-24; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:14-16; 1 John 4:12); others speak of apparent theophanies in which God appears on earth or in heaven (Gen 3:8-9; 18:1-33; Exod 24:9-10; 33:18-23; Num 12:1-10; 1 Kgs 22:19; Job 1:6-2:6; Isa 6:1-6; Ezek 1:26-28; Dan 7:9-14; Zech 3:1-6; Acts 7:56; Heb 8:1-10:22; 12:22-23; Rev 4:2-7:10, 21:23-25; 22:1-5; *etc.*). Rather than an either/or approach, a richer reading might understand some texts referring to the transcendent God in his essential being beyond all creation, other texts affirming that God may assume finite form within his creation. While animorphisms and anthropomorphisms are used of God in Scripture, the interpretation that *all* heavenly language is mere analogy may reflect more the influence of neoplatonism in Christian history than the biblical depiction of a heavenly reality. See brief discussions in John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2002) 583-91; and Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 188-90.

From this vantage, the triune God reveals himself through finite forms without limiting himself to those forms. He is simultaneously inside and outside creation, not bound to, but active within the spacial and other created orders. In this way, the Holy Trinity's presence englobes both creation and non-creation, preserving divine transcendent glory (the immanent Trinity) together with the Godhead's functional working within creation (the economic Trinity). Often we are taught to think in two dimensions: heaven and earth. But we might better conceive of reality in at least three spheres in respect to God: (1) our universe and world in which the triune God has shown himself, most properly in the Incarnation; (2) the celestial dimension of angels, where saints too will have glorified bodies before the eternal God-man Jesus Christ and in the presence of the Father; and (3) the transcendent, immanent Trinity, beyond all dimensions and ultimately all comprehension.

CONCLUSION: TRINITY, GLORY, AND CHRISTENDOM TODAY

In view of the infinite, personal nature of the Most High God as revealed in the Bible with absolute perfection, self-sufficiency, unchangeableness, and free will, and in view of the Trinitarian structure of the universe which gives meaning to us as persons—with rationality, morality, love, balance between unity and diversity, and so very much more—something yet needs to be said. Nearly everything mentioned until now is related to *our* worldview, our human perspective. However, having begun with the Trinity before creation, we pause to realize that everything that is not creation is God. If the tripersonal God existed as all-inclusive before creation, then this God is now in all "places" and all "realms" (language fails us) where there is no creation. Surrounding the dimensions of creation resides the infinite triune Lord, the Lord of

all, exercising his magnificent character.[31] For those who are Christians, redeemed by the work of Christ at the Cross, finite creation constitutes an enormous crib over which and around which the triune God hovers, affectionately caring for his own. All creation will someday recognize the greatness and beauty of God, together with the unfathomable debt it owns to the Almighty for its existence, preservation, and provision of salvation in Christ Jesus. It is likely this overwhelming understanding of our utter indebtedness to God that is our main role as created personal beings. In glorifying the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we are realized and fulfilled as finite persons in the eternal plan of God. Nonetheless, there is no more blessed glory than that glory given by each member of the Holy Trinity to the other, each wholly comprehending and exalting the greatness of the other.

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325) and its theological development at Constantinople (381) established the confessional center of Christian faith. We began our overview with a warning to respect divine mystery, reminding ourselves that there is much we do not know and much more about which we have only opinions, given the ambiguity of biblical and historical evidence. Yet the concepts of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed are the boundaries of what is licit, versus what must not be said. In light of these firm truths we should welcome new cultural constructions of Trinitarian doctrine as believers worldwide seek to articulate more deeply the Christian doctrine of God and its meaning for their lives. Surely some of the miss-steps that yet plague wider expressions of Christendom will reoccur (and these must be deemed in error). Yet as Christianity's masses increasingly and overwhelmingly weigh the scales to the global South, believers with non-Western languages and thought forms should

---

[31] Finger, "Modern Alienation and Trinitarian Creation," 205, observes: "As long as this space remains 'empty' enough for creatures to retain distinct identities, this image need not be panentheistic. I think it can help us conceive how the divine love is not really distant from our world, but still surrounds us; and how sin may not be running from God so much as pushing away the One who longs to draw near."

endeavor to articulate Trinitarian doctrine and to work out its implications for how they should live in the midst of their own evolving milieus.

The purpose of this article has been to offer a tentative framework for a transcultural Trinitarian worldview. I have attempted to outline a biblical-theological superstructure that can help unify varying contextualized expressions of Christian faith around Trinitarian confession. Of course, for the international reader, my own vantage has been exceedingly Western and North Atlantic. For this reason believers in different cultures need one another—to enlarge, deepen, and balance our perspectives. But the suggestion, humbly submitted, is especially for a missional Trinitarian worldview—not missional as from one culture to another, rather missional as each body of believers seeks to interpret and engage Trinitarian faith within their own culture. We are to live out the faith we profess. And so, in the plurality and beauty of the body of Christ worldwide, may the understanding of our triune God continue to unfold in fresh insights and intentional application—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.