

## **The Trinity Within and Beyond Time and Space**

According to classical theism and monist philosophy, absolute divinity necessitated complete transcendence of time and space. The eternity and infinity of God was seen not as something that incorporated creation into its limitlessness, but rather was something unrelated to creation. Ted Peters argues that the failure to incorporate time and space into the infinity and eternity of God was a major contributor towards separate trinities in Christian theology. Peters says that this resulted in “an eternal immanent Trinity with only a dubious tie to the economic Trinity responsible for the saving work in history.”<sup>1</sup> The nuanced dualism in historical trinitarianism is in large part the result of two competing commitments: the commitment to witness to the revelation of God in human history, and the commitment to the patriarchal deity of Hellenist philosophy that is unrelated to human history. While the former commitment represents the core of the Christian message, the latter commitment is increasingly in question. As LaCugna explains,

There is no God who might turn out to be different from the God of salvation history, even if God’s mystery remains absolute. The God of Jesus Christ whom we come to know in the Spirit *is* the eternal, free, absolutely mysterious God who exists as the mystery of love and communion.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in the Divine Life*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 211.

Robert Jenson is also critical of trinitarian views that seek to distance God from time and space. He argues that such views have led to the practical irrelevance of the Trinity in the Western Church.

The three derive from God's reality in time; from time's past/present/future. But if the One is one precisely by abstraction from time, the one-and-three can never be made to work. The relations are either *temporal* relations or empty verbiage. In Western trinitarianism, which will not let the relations be temporal, that God is 'one and three' becomes the sheer mystification Western churchgoers accept – or reject – it as: something we assert because we are supposed to, not knowing even what we are asserting.<sup>3</sup>

One attempt at the integration of God with creation is the pantheism of process theology. Despite its allure, however, process theology is critiqued as failing to adequately distinguish between God and creation. By collapsing them into each other, process theology integrates God and creation, but in a way that denies that God is also beyond creation. A popular middle way exists between the complete unrelatedness of classical theism and the lack of differentiation in process theology. This middle way is ultimately a variation of panentheism, the belief that God exists both within and beyond space and time. Such a perspective is not only historically orthodox, it seems the only way in which God can be properly understood as both immanent and transcendent, and as in relationship with creation while being beyond it. Panentheism does not require two trinities – one for God's eternal beyondness, and one for God's temporal relatedness. However, the difficulty of bringing these disparate notions together is precisely why dualistic trinitarianism is widespread. Therefore, the need is for descriptive models of the Trinity that integrate God as both within and beyond space and time. It is to such integrative models of the Trinity that we now turn.

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 125-26.

## **TOWARD AN EGALITARIAN TRINITY**

### **Integration without Symmetry Implies Subordination**

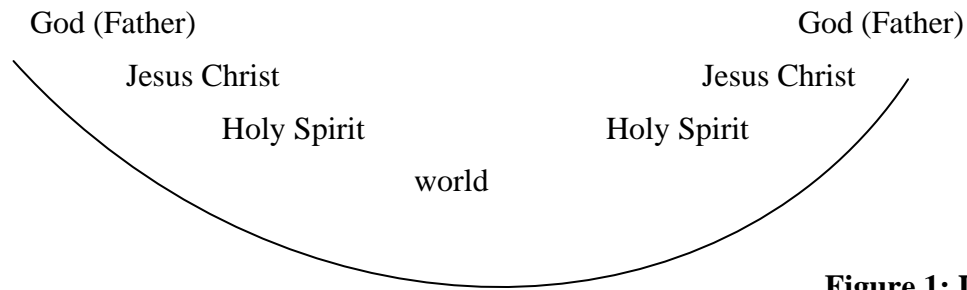
Integrative models seek to eliminate the false distinction between the immanent and the economic trinities. These models bring together the separate understandings of who Christians believe God to be. They do so without limiting God to either exclusively within, or exclusively outside of creation. In essence, an integrated trinitarian model is a descriptive illustration of the Trinity in terms of who God is in and for Godself and who God is in and for us.

A characteristic of an integrated understanding of Trinity is that it prevents one from describing God in both subordinationist and egalitarian terms at the same time. This is precisely the strength of integrated models, in that they do not describe the Trinity in a false dualistic way. The test of egalitarianism within integrated models is denoted by the symmetry between the three trinitarian persons. If the three persons are illustrated symmetrically, then the model will illustrate egalitarianism. If the three persons are illustrated asymmetrically, then the model will illustrate subordinationism. The two best integrative models of the Trinity that I am aware of are Catherine Mowry LaCugna's model found in *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, and Robert Jenson's model found in *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel*.

### **Integrative Model - LaCugna**

In *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, Catherine Mowry LaCugna presents an integrated model. LaCugna expresses the dynamic action of the Trinity

chiastically:<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1: LaCugna Model**

As LaCugna explains,

[the chiasm] expresses the one ecstatic movement of God outward by which all things originate from God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and all things are brought into union with God and returned to God. There is neither an economic nor an immanent Trinity.<sup>5</sup>

In LaCugna's model, the Father is the ontological source from which the Son and the Spirit originate. In the first half of the chiasm, the world comes into being from the Father, through Jesus Christ, and then through the Holy Spirit. The second half of the chiasm incorporates God's redemptive acts in history, in which all things return through the Holy Spirit, then through Jesus Christ back to the Father.

LaCugna's model is thorough and thoughtful in that she succeeds in outlining an integrated understanding of Trinity. However, the model is also problematic. She equates God with the Father in a way that subtly implies that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not fully God. While LaCugna is certainly in the traditional majority in this mistake, such a move introduces subordination within the Trinity. While LaCugna would not want to suggest inequality between the three divine persons, her model upholds the ontological subordination inherent in theologies of the Father as Monarch. It is no

---

<sup>4</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 223.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

surprise then, to hear her echo Torrance and Zizioulas:

In the Bible, in early creeds, in most liturgical doxologies and Eucharistic prayers, as well as in Greek theology, ‘God’ and ‘Father’ are synonyms. God the Father is *ho theos*, the Uncreated Creator, Unoriginate Origin of everything that is. God the Father is the font of divinity, source of Word and Spirit. The biblical and creedal notion of redemption is that it originates with God the Father and is realized in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

While theologians certainly have reason enough to equate the Father with God, they often do so in such a way as to logically suggest that the Son and the Spirit are not equated with God. Yes, the Father is synonymous with God, but to say so without also saying the same of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is to deny the Trinity in favor of monism. The Trinity, therefore, demands symmetrical models in which the Father, Son and Spirit are all equally God. LaCugna’s model, while it is integrative, is asymmetrical in its description of the three trinitarian persons. The emerging challenge is to describe the Trinity, in both integrative and symmetrical terms, in such a way as to honor the scriptural and traditional submission of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father in human history.

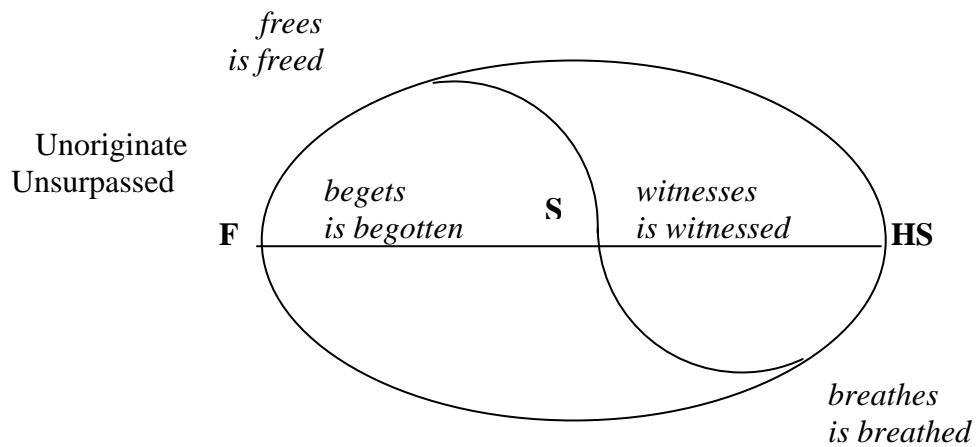
### **Integrative Models – Jenson**

Robert Jenson in *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel*, presents an integrative model of the Trinity that moves us towards symmetry. Starting with the Father as “Unoriginate”, Jenson’s model moves successively to Son and then Spirit in line with God’s revelation in scripture. Careful to describe the trinitarian relations in a complete way, he draws arrows back to the Father from the Son and the Spirit. While one end of the model demarks the Unoriginate nature of the Father, Jenson also demarks

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 215.

the opposite end of the model, which illustrates the “Unsurpassed” nature of the Holy Spirit. With Jesus Christ as the Son at the center, Jenson’s model sees the Unoriginate Father at the beginning of the model, along with the Unsurpassed Holy Spirit at the end of the model:<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 2: Jenson Model**

Jenson believes that asymmetrical models and the light subordination that accompanies them result from a classical preoccupation with finding God at the Beginning. Under such a preoccupation, models start with the Father and point towards the Son, Spirit, and their activity in the world. With the Father as the ontological and active source of divinity, these models imply lesser or passive deity regarding the Son and the Spirit. Jenson is critical of ontological subordination implied by the Unoriginate nature of the Father. He says that “there can be no conception of the origin of the Son or the Spirit. Both are simply eternal as God is eternal.”<sup>8</sup> By drawing arrows back to the Father and emphasizing the End as well as the Beginning, Jenson attempts to describe the

<sup>7</sup> Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

Trinity symmetrically.

Yet the symmetry of Jenson's model is not fully convincing. He draws relations back to the Father in order to say that the passive relations in the Trinity are just as constitutive of God as the active relations initiated by the Father. For example, the Father begets the Son, but the Son is also begotten of the Father. Additionally, the Father breathes the Spirit, but the Spirit also is breathed of the Father. Jenson is certainly correct in his argument that the passive actions are just as constitutive of divinity as the active actions. His argument, however, does not introduce symmetry and is in fact the same argument used by subordinationists to justify subordination of every stripe. While it is indeed just as godly to obey as to rule, a divinity which is eternally lording over itself in a static hierarchical system does not achieve equality of divine persons, nor does it promote symmetrical understandings of the Trinity.

The symmetry of the Jenson model is also in question in regards to the "Unsurpassed" nature of the Holy Spirit at the End. The Unoriginate nature of the Father at the Beginning clearly denotes ontological primacy as Absolute God who exists before the Son and Spirit. That the Son and the Spirit are ontologically subsequent denotes their clear subordination in the Godhead. While the purpose of the Unsurpassed Holy Spirit in Jenson's model is to counteract the "Unoriginate" nature of the Father at the Beginning, it does not achieve a true balance. Being Unsurpassed at the End simply implies equality – that the Son and the Father 'do not surpass' and therefore are equal to the Spirit. An implication of equality at the End does not remove, counteract, or deny the overt subordination and inequality at the Beginning.

**Dynamism: Moving Beyond the Static Trinity**

The models presented by LaCugna, Jenson, and others represent a growing movement to articulate the Trinity in terms of the full equality of the three Trinitarian persons while remaining true to the scriptures. In witness to the redemptive acts of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Bible portrays the Son as subordinate to the Father's will. While this voluntary humbling of the Son is temporary, models of the Trinity that are to be integrative need to uphold the scriptural witness of the incarnation of Jesus Christ as crucial. The problem with such models as they have been presented in the past is that they make the temporary humiliation of the Son in the Kenosis (and also the sending of the Spirit) an eternal static condition of the trinitarian relations.

The submission of Jesus Christ in the incarnation forms the historical core of the revelation of God. Any model, if it is to be integrative, must include this. Also, the full co-equality and co-eternality of the three divine persons is what makes the Trinity the Trinity - and it is the Trinity which gives the cross its redemptive power. Any model, if it is to be symmetrical, must include this also. Such integrative symmetrical models are lacking. The reason for this lies behind the metaphysical commitment to models of God that are static. Greek philosophy demands an unchanging, unfeeling, uncaring, unmoving, completely apathetic and monist divinity trapped in its own inability. The failure to jettison these notions results in our complete inability to integrate the dynamic equality of perichoresis with the temporary submission of the incarnation.

The open trinitarianism of Jürgen Moltmann is foremost among theologies that are critical of philosophical commitments to the apathetic God. In *The Trinity and the Kingdom* he makes a case for rejecting such metaphysical notions because they are antithetical to the redemptive work of Christ. He says regarding the suffering of God that

“A God who cannot suffer cannot love either. A God who cannot love is a dead God. He is poorer than any man or woman.”<sup>9</sup> Moltmann also pushes the idea of movement within the divine. He argues that movement is absolutely necessary for God’s redemptive acts in history. To deny movement in the Trinity is to reject the Trinity and the entirety of the Christian faith: “Anyone who denies movement in the divine nature also denies the divine Trinity. And to deny this is really to deny the whole Christian faith. . . the lack of any creative movement would mean an imperfection in the Absolute.”<sup>10</sup>

An integrative and symmetrical model requires dynamism. Static notions of God make integrating trinitarian perichoresis and the revelation of Jesus Christ impossible. Yet the Trinity is not trapped by a perichoretic egalitarianism that is removed and unrelated to time and space. The Trinity is also not limited to the revelation of God in creation. The Trinity incorporates both of these notions and exists both within and beyond time and space. The Trinity exists in a dynamic perichoresis that incorporates our life into the divine life. By understanding the dynamic Trinity as the God who enters into the world in creation, redemption and sanctification, we can understand the perichoretic movement of God and the movements of God in human history as one and the same. It is to such a model that we now turn.

---

<sup>9</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom : The Doctrine of God*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.