

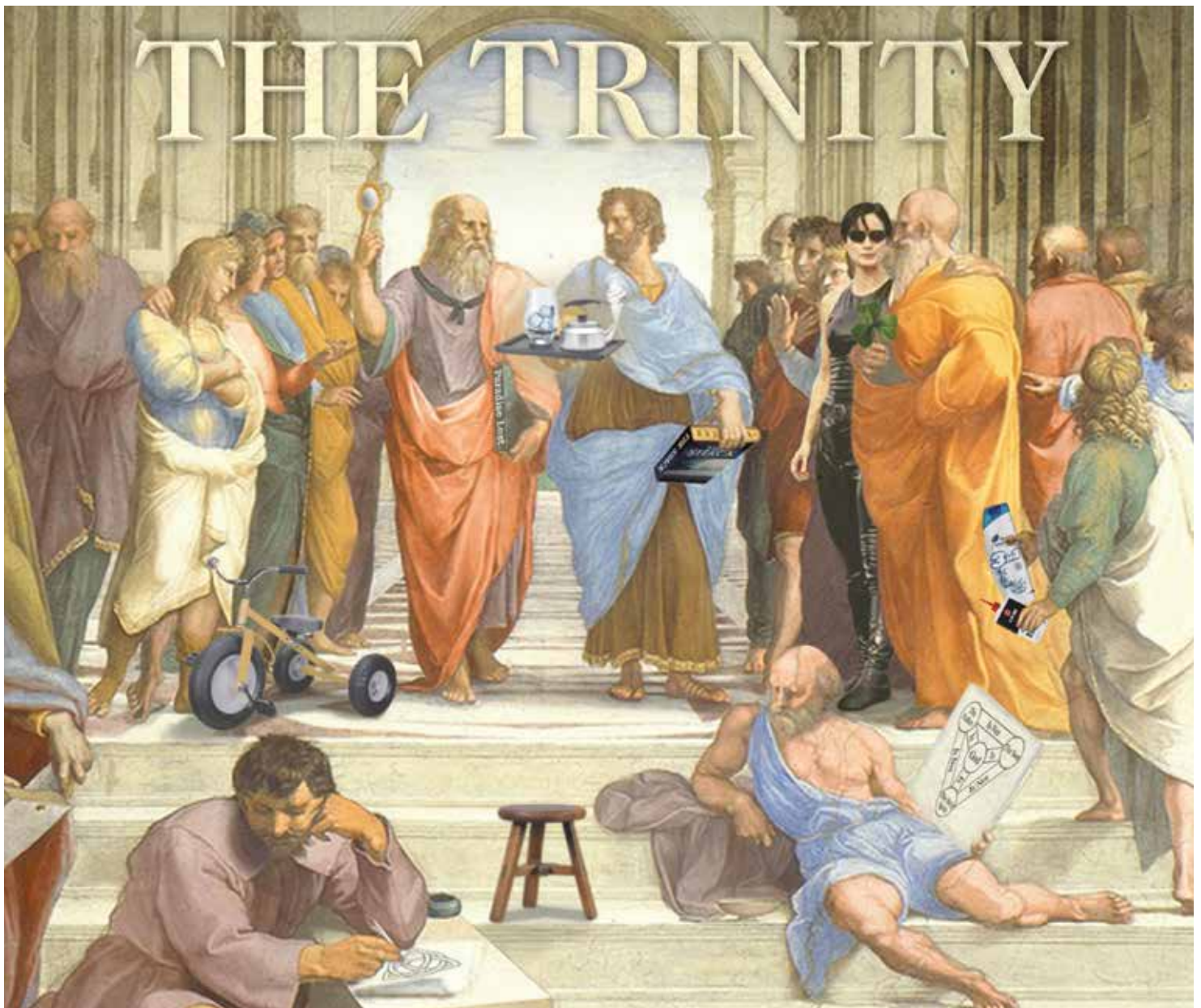


MISSION

ISSUE 4 2016

CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture



UNDERSTANDING IT, EXPLAINING IT, LIVING IT

**THE RISE AND
FALL OF THE
SOCIAL TRINITY**

04// *Stephen Holmes*

02// A LETTER FROM LUCY BERRY 03// EDITORIAL
07// WILLIAM LANE CRAIG EXTRACT 08// TRINITY AND
DIFFICULT WOMEN 10// PAUL FIDDES ON WHAT WE GET
WRONG ABOUT THE TRINITY 12// DIFFERENCE WITHIN THE
TRINITY 14// Q&A: SAMUEL ESCOBAR 16// FURTHER READING

LETTERS

END TIMES REVISITED

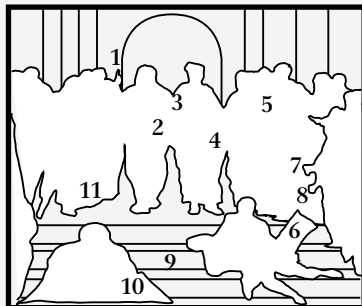
I was quite amazed by the article *Who is the antichrist?* (page 9, issue 2 2016) which shows a remarkable lack of knowledge by a fellow Baptist. First: why would the Holy Spirit inspire men to use words like leviathan (and, similarly, behemoth) which wouldn't mean a thing if they never existed? By the scriptural descriptions it is almost certain they were what we call dinosaurs. The word "dragon" appears many times, ignoring Revelation, in the old Authorised Version. Omitted, of course, by modern translators who know better than God, apparently.

Second: the list of personages mentioned as possibly being the antichrist is quite right but none of them really matched the description. Although the spirit of antichrist has been with us all along, *the* antichrist is quite clearly a man who is still to come – Satan's counterfeit of the Christ. He will have charisma and for a time will appear to solve all the world's political, economic and religious problems. Daniel may have been predicting Antiochus IV, obviously the nearest "type" – but Jesus certainly wasn't when he quotes Daniel. As a footnote, it's interesting that Jesus, brought up in the Jewish tradition, should refer to Daniel as a prophet. The Jews have never included Daniel in their list of prophets.

Bill Clews

AN EMBARRASSMENT OF IMAGES

Great philosophers, discussing heady topics. Crowds of people trying to understand. *The School of Athens* by Raphael seemed the ideal basis for our cover illustration this issue. Did you spot all the too-familiar sermon illustrations, children's talk ideas and ways of thinking of the Trinity we've included in it? Brownie points for guessing the 20th century interloper! Write in!



1. "It's kind of like an egg... You have the yolk, the shell, the white bit... Different, but all, you know, *eggy*..."
2. *Paradise Lost* by Milton: a wonderful characterisation particularly of the relationship between the Father and the Son. A theologically reasonable understanding of the Trinity? Nope.
3. A glass of water. Ice blocks in it. Steam rising from them and from a kettle. One substance, many states. A classic image for explaining the Trinity. Do you find it helpful?
4. *The Shack* was not universally loved for its depiction of the 'third person' of the Trinity.
5. Shamrock shenanigan: do you find the classic organic symbol of the trinity helpful?
6. Or do you prefer a more comprehensive diagram of relationships?
7. Product placement in *Catalyst*. That happened.
8. ♪ Give me oil in my lamp...
9. I need to sit down now.
10. The beauty of Celtic knot work and the beauty of the Trinity; an infinite likeness.
11. Trinitarian analogies: child's play.

POETRY AS CORRESPONDENCE

We're facing, as I write, the shaping of a nastier Turkey, the unfolding of a Trumpeting USA where black lives seem only to matter to black people – and new terrors, daily, across our world. And I've heard Christians saying, "well, God is punishing us". Dear Lord, how wrong!

Armageddon

Some say The End is coming.
Some say the Time is Nigh.
Some say this current mayhem
bodes Justice from on high;
There's talk of Armageddon
on some believers' lips:
the final Time of Trial,
God's great Apocalypse.

But armageddon fed up
of all this end-time chat.
And armageddon angry
you think that God's like that.
And armageddon sick and tired
of all this black and white.
And armageddon worn out
by folks who know they're right.

God cannot be a part of
the madness we are choosing.
God cannot enter systems
where everyone is losing.
God cannot get into those hearts
which have a double lock.
All God can do is weep, and wait,
and stand at the door and knock.

So, armageddon sickened
by ev'ry hateful blast.
And armageddon anxious
how long it's going to last.
And armageddon frightened
of hatred undissolved.
But mostly I'm disgusted
you'd think that God's involved.

Lucy Berry

All letters to Mission Catalyst at PO Box 49, 129 Broadway, Didcot, OX11 8XA and emails to catalyst@bmsworldmission.org will be considered for publication and may be edited for length and style if selected. Many letters are invited. Not all are chosen.

IS TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY A DISTRACTION?



HOW WE UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF GOD IS OF CENTRAL IMPORTANCE TO HOW WE ACT FOR HIM IN LIFE.

The world has gone mad. We look to Europe and the Middle East and terror fills our news bulletins. We look across the pond and gawp at the prospect of 'an unusual presidential prospect'. War abounds and millions flee as refugees. Markets rise and fall. The poor stay poor while the rich get richer.

Meanwhile, we are doing some theology! And if that sounds like an indulgence, a bit of distraction therapy, then you couldn't be more wrong. Maybe the craziness around us is a reminder that the world's most urgent questions remain "is there a God? And if so, what is God like?" It's that second question that drives trinitarian thinking, an area of theology that is much in vogue these days. In this issue of *Catalyst* you'll get a glimpse of where the debate is liveliest and you can make up your own mind whether talk of a trinitarian revival is appropriate or not. Either way, at a very practical level, how we view the Trinity shapes every word we dare to speak about God, whether it be the God we preach about or the God we talk about to our friends and family.

Keith Ward, in his 2015 book *Christ and the Cosmos – a Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*, addresses three reasons why we may need to revise the ways we talk about the Trinity.

Firstly, because language has changed and, for example, the Greek and Latin for 'person' and 'substance' conveyed one thing 1,500 years ago and different things today.

Secondly, because we might want to change some of the things we say about God anyway. Ward uses the example of the immutability or unchangeableness of God, which draws from Aristotelian philosophy. Today, as philosophy has developed and changed, so we are more comfortable entertaining the possibility of a God who changes in response to what we think or do... or pray!

Thirdly, because our worldview has changed, and by that I mean literally, the view *from* our world, and philosophically, the way we view our world. In biblical times people saw the earth as the centre of a very young universe. Most Christians and most scientists today will see the universe as expanding, as

billions of years old, as infinitely more complex than once understood. Into this cosmos came the second 'person' of the Trinity and it is pretty likely that our understanding of the incarnation may need to reflect this worldview. But the way we view the world has also changed. Our understanding of gender, for example, is markedly different to what it was 50 years ago, let alone 2,000 years ago. What difference does that make, if any, to our understanding of God, and does a trinitarian perspective help us in this area also?

A key area that will feature is the debate between what can be called the 'social trinitarian' and older Christian perspectives on the Trinity.

Ultimately this might be seen as a futile task, for we are using words that flow from finite men and women to express the essence of a being who is spirit, who is infinite and who is wholly other.

Yet, in Scripture it is made clear that God has made himself known and, in our quest, God allows encounter to happen. How we describe the one we encounter is the challenge.

David

David Kerrigan
General Director



Birmingham 16 November

Reading 17 November

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THE RISE AND FALL OF 'SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM'

THE 'SOCIAL TRINITY' – ITS ORIGINS, PROBLEMS AND FUTURE.

Something happened in 1983. Well, lots of things happened in 1983. The migration of the ARPANET to TCP/IP was completed, which apparently means that the internet happened. The TV series *M*A*S*H* ended – that was a tragedy! Neil Kinnock became Labour leader. McDonalds introduced the Chicken McNugget. Lots of things happened in 1983.

One of them was the beginning of a British Council of Churches (BCC) study commission on 'Trinitarian Doctrine Today'. This was in part a response to the renewed interest in the Spirit that came out of charismatic renewal. They gathered a group of theologians from across British denominations, many of whom were to become influential amongst the churches in the UK: Colin Gunton, Paul Fiddes, Jane Williams, Andrew Walker, John Zizioulas.

The commission's published output, *The Forgotten Trinity*, claimed that the doctrine of the Trinity had become neglected amongst the churches, and offered a diagnosis of the ills that resulted from that. The doctrine of the Trinity, the report claimed, should be hugely significant for our social ethics and our ecclesiology. Because we see the perfection of personal relationships in the divine life, the love shared by Father, Son, and Spirit, we are able to speak powerfully about how personal relationships should work amongst human persons, whether in the Church or in society more generally.

Not everyone who was a part of the

BCC study commission was a 'social trinitarian': several of them have specifically disowned the term. Fiddes [featured in this issue of *Catalyst*], for example, describes his trinitarian theology as 'relational trinitarianism' and – rightly – distinguishes it carefully from 'social trinitarianism'. That said, finding a model for human sociality in the divine life is at the heart of much recent trinitarian theology.

Without pretending important academic distinctions don't exist, we might usefully use 'social trinitarianism' as a label for all approaches to trinitarian theology that draw ethical consequences for human societies from the eternal triune life. Most current Baptist ministers will have learnt this idea at college, and imported it into their ministry to some extent.

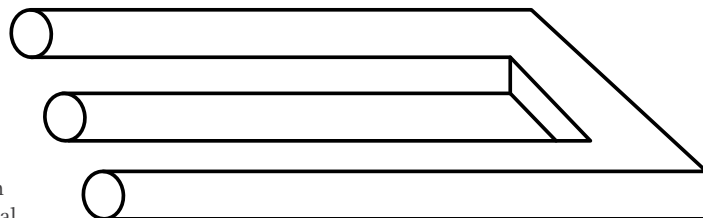
Social trinitarianism has become orthodoxy in our churches; but where does it come from, and is it right?

THE ORIGINS OF SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM

Much 19th century academic theology was concerned to minimise the differences between the great world religions. The particularity of Christianity was embarrassing in a world of faiths; if the evangelical response was to engage sufficiently energetically in world mission that the embarrassment would go away

when the world believed, the more mainstream response was to propose a shared facet of human experience, called 'religion', and to assert that all religions are essentially the same, however different they may look on the surface. In the face of this, peculiarly Christian ideas such as incarnation and Trinity were systematically downplayed and re-interpreted.

This was the theology in which Karl Barth was schooled, and against which he rebelled in his justly famous commentary on Romans. He accepted the concept of religion, which he understood as humanity's universal, endless and (he



became convinced) fruitless search for the divine. The faith of the Bible, however, he maintained had nothing to do with 'religion' so understood: the God of the Bible is fundamentally unknown and unknowable, infinitely beyond us all, and this reality renders all religious searching futile. At the same time, in Jesus God had come to us. Barth therefore returned ideas of Trinity and incarnation to their proper central place in theological thought. To be Christian is to confess and worship the triune God, who can be known, confessed, and worshipped only because God the Son has become human amongst us.

Theology after Barth began to be interested in the Trinity again, but found the doctrine strange, alien, metaphysical. Another strand of 19th century theology,



The Baptism of Christ, Sebastiano Ricci (1713-14) © Public domain

represented in Britain most powerfully by PT Forsyth, had proposed (to borrow Forsyth's phrase) "the moralisation of dogma" as a vital task. Whereas older theology had thought of God primarily in metaphysical terms – omnipresent, omnipotent, eternal, immortal, invisible – 19th century theologians wanted to elevate the moral perfections of God. To be God, on their understanding, was to be perfectly good and loving, much more than it was to be infinitely powerful. As the doctrine of the Trinity had not been of great interest, it had not really been re-conceptualised under this new understanding of divine perfection (although one or two writers, notably Isaak Dorner, had tried).

Dusting off an older doctrine of the Trinity, 20th century theologians found a technical and austere discussion of metaphysical relations in a simple essence. If this was the heart of Christianity, Christianity looked a fairly unappetising option in an increasingly open marketplace of faiths. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner's brilliant little book on the Trinity, published in German in 1967, was a response to this. Rahner assumed Barth's claim that the Trinity should be at the heart of Christianity, but claimed (plausibly) that most, indeed virtually all, Catholic devotional literature

“ *No significant theologian in history taught social trinitarianism* ”

would not need editing were the doctrine suddenly to be declared untrue. What was the answer to this near-universal neglect of what should have been the central doctrine of the faith?

Rahner's answer was twofold. First, he insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity should not be an afterthought to the doctrine of God. We should not, that is, talk about God as love and/or as omnipotent before we have talked of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. Second, he proposed that the doctrine of the Trinity had become abstract because it had become separated from the gospel story. When we speak of 'Trinity', we should think first of Jesus' prayer in John 14 to 17, not of metaphysical definitions.

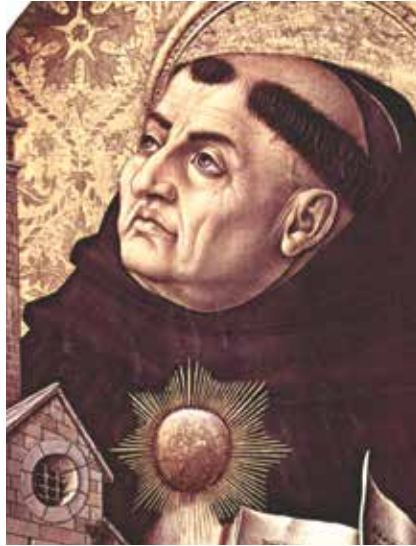
Later Catholic theologians such as Catherine Mowry LaCugna would suggest that Rahner had not gone anything like far enough. She believed that a proper focus on the New Testament would lead us simply to reject all the metaphysical language as misguided and unhelpful.

There was little challenge to his basic approach, however; LaCugna and others were travelling the same road, even if they wanted to go far further down it than he had.

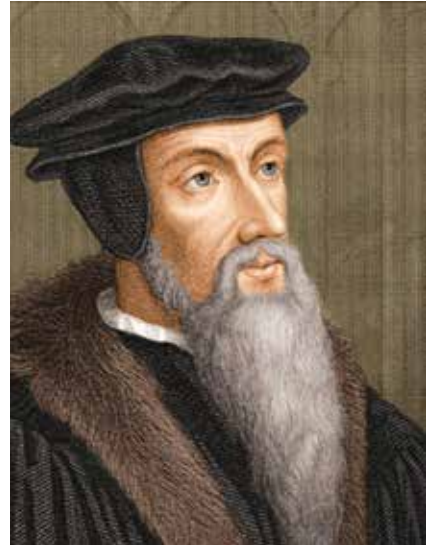
A third leg of recent social trinitarianism came in John Zizioulas's *Being as Communion* (1985). Zizioulas argued that the fourth century Cappadocian Fathers (who are responsible for the theology encapsulated in the Nicene Creed) made a massive intellectual breakthrough: they defined ultimate reality in personal and relational terms, rather than in substantial terms. That is, on Zizioulas's telling, all metaphysics had defined what a thing is on the basis of the sort of thing it is – substance. God is God because, crudely, God is a divine thing, made of god-stuff. For the Cappadocians, he argues, God is God because of the personal relationships God is in – supremely the triune relationships. In the second half of the book, Zizioulas developed an account of the Church



Augustine of Hippo



Thomas Aquinas



John Calvin

as a network of personal relationships established by, and centred around, the Trinity – and so began what I have termed social trinitarianism.

WANING POPULARITY

For something like two decades around the year 2000, social trinitarianism was widespread and exciting. I grew up on it, specifically the school that developed around Colin Gunton at the Research Institute for Systematic Theology at Kings College London, where Zizioulas was also on staff part-time. My theology tutors at Spurgeon’s, Nigel Wright and John Colwell, had both done doctorates with Gunton; I learnt trinitarian theology from them, and went on to study with (and then work alongside) Colin myself. Books flowed on such subjects as *Persons: Divine and Human* and *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. We were excited by that ‘promise’, and confident that a focus on persons in relationship would unlock all theological mysteries. At the time, we were hardly alone; most of the interesting theological projects of the day (whether Moltmann in Germany, Jenson in the USA, or Boff in Brazil) were in the same orbit.

There were at least two problems with what we were doing, however. One turned on the forms of human sociality we were finding. For Zizioulas, the Church is given life by the bishop just as the Son and the Spirit are given life by the Father, so his ecclesiology is very hierarchical. Other social trinitarian writers – Miroslav Volf, for example – borrowed Zizioulas’s insistence that the Trinity is a model for the Church, but wanted a much more equal ecclesiology. Volf’s book *After Our Likeness* drew heavily on the founder

of the English Baptist movement, John Smyth, arguing for a Church that is constituted by free association of equal members.

Ecclesiologically, I am with Volf here; politically, I am emphatically with him. Zizioulas never applied his trinitarian vision to politics, but the obvious outworking would be monarchy or dictatorship. However, Volf differs from Zizioulas because he – explicitly – makes a change to the doctrine of the Trinity, and in terms of received ecumenical theology, it is an unacceptable change. If the Church is to be patterned after the triune life, the right Church polity is extreme episcopal hierarchy. If human society is to be patterned after the triune life, nightmare scenarios ensue.

The second problem is that Zizioulas’ account of the history of the doctrine is just not plausible. The Cappadocian Fathers did not replace substance-based ontology with relational ontology; that has been demonstrated beyond doubt by a new wave of excellent patristic scholarship, led by Lewis Ayres. Nor did, really, any significant theologian in history teach what we now call social trinitarianism; it is a very recent invention, incompatible with classical trinitarian theology.

I have argued this in a book; Karen Kilby has been made the same point in various papers. My argument was historical, drawing on Ayres and a host of other brilliant historians: social

trinitarianism might be right, but, if it is, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and so on were just wrong about the Trinity. And so are the creeds (which for me is a problem). Karen has been more philosophical: the social trinitarian arguments have been less than careful and, when examined, do not prove what they claim to prove, or prove far too much.

THE FUTURE OF TRINITARIANISM

I think the tide has turned: in 2013, an international dogmatics conference gathered in Los Angeles to discuss where trinitarian theology should go after the demise of social trinitarianism (Kilby, Ayres, and I were amongst the speakers). There are those who disagree, of course, and still offer spirited defences of the movement, but it no longer carries all before it. The most interesting theological projects of this decade (in my judgement) are generally opposed to social trinitarianism – for instance, Katherine Sonderegger’s multi-volume systematics, which has begun with an extensive volume on the doctrine of God’s unity.

The idea that trinitarian doctrine might tell us how to be Church and how to envision society is a hugely attractive one. Hugely attractive ideas can be wrong too, unfortunately.

“ If social trinitarianism is right, Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin were wrong ”

EXTRACT

A PHILOSOPHICAL DEFENCE OF THE TRINITY

THIS EXTRACT FROM A PIECE BY CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER WILLIAM LANE CRAIG SETS OUT THE DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE TRINITY AND A PHILOSOPHICAL APOLOGETIC FOR WHY GOD MUST BE TRINITY.

Does the doctrine of the Trinity make sense? Enlightenment thinkers denounced the doctrine as an incoherence; but during the 20th century many theologians came to a reappraisal of trinitarian theology, and in recent decades a number of Christian philosophers have sought to formulate defensible versions of the doctrine of the Trinity. Two broad models or approaches are typically identified: social trinitarianism, which lays greater emphasis on the diversity of the persons, and Latin trinitarianism, which places greater stress on the unity of God. This nomenclature is, however, misleading, since the great Latin Church Fathers Tertullian and Hilary were both social trinitarians, as was Athanasius, a fount of Latin theology. Therefore, I shall instead contrast social trinitarianism with what one wag has called anti-social trinitarianism. The central commitment of social trinitarianism is that in God there are three distinct centres of self-consciousness, each with its proper intellect and will. The central commitment of anti-social trinitarianism is that there is only one God, whose unicity of intellect and will is not compromised by the diversity of persons. Social trinitarianism threatens to veer into tri-theism; anti-social trinitarianism is in danger of lapsing into Unitarianism...

Finally, although the doctrine of the Trinity belongs to revealed theology rather than to natural theology, we may ask if there are any positive arguments which might be offered on behalf of the plausibility of that doctrine. I close with an argument

which a number of Christian philosophers have defended for God's being a plurality of persons. God is by definition the greatest conceivable being. As the greatest conceivable being, God must be perfect.

In other words, God is not a single, isolated person, as unitarian forms of theism like Islam hold; rather God is a plurality of persons, as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity affirms. On the

“If God is perfectly loving by his nature, he must be giving himself in love to another”

Now a perfect being must be a loving being. For love is a moral perfection; it is better for a person to be loving rather than unloving. God therefore must be a perfectly loving being. Now it is of the very nature of love to give oneself away. Love reaches out to another person rather than centring wholly in oneself. So if God is perfectly loving by his very nature, he must be giving himself in love to another. But who is that other? It cannot be any created person, since creation is a result of God's free will, not a result of his nature. It belongs to God's very essence to love, but it does not belong to his essence to create. So we can imagine a possible world in which God is perfectly loving and yet no created persons exist. So created persons cannot sufficiently explain whom God loves. Moreover, contemporary cosmology makes it plausible that created persons have not always existed. But God is eternally loving. So again created persons alone are insufficient to account for God's being perfectly loving. It therefore follows that the other to whom God's love is necessarily directed must be internal to God himself.

unitarian view, God is a person who does not give himself away essentially in love for another; he is focused essentially only on himself. Hence, he cannot be the most perfect being. But on the Christian view, God is a triad of persons in eternal, self-giving love relationships. Thus, since God is essentially loving, the doctrine of the Trinity is more plausible than any unitarian doctrine of God.



This extract is taken from *A Formulation and Defense of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, originally published on Lane Craig's Reasonable Faith blog. You can read the full essay at <http://bit.ly/2bk6ms9>

FATHER, SON, AND DIFFICULT WOMEN

IS ADDING A FEMININE PRONOUN TO THE TRINITY REALLY HELPFUL? SARAH COAKLEY HAS SOME THOUGHTS.

We have our second woman Prime Minister, so I was wondering whether, with this slender sign of slippage in patriarchy, it was time to speak up for some female language in describing God. ‘Mother’ may seem too radical, and also it takes us away from the language of Jesus, so I would settle for following some notable theologians (and evidently a whole Syriac tradition) in referring to the ungendered Holy Spirit as ‘she’.

That’s where I was going with this article, when an unexpected conversation about the Trinity threw me a bit off course. It took place in hospital over Communion with someone who had just undergone gender reassignment surgery. They were studying theology and, by a strange coincidence, were reading the same book as me: Sarah Coakley’s intriguing *God, Sexuality and the Self*. After reading the words of Jesus, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me,” I asked, “As a transgender person, where does your body fit into your faith?” The person answered that binary language about God, as well as references to hierarchy, were unhelpful. They went on to say that the text that is often used by feminist theologians – “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them,” (Genesis 1: 27) is often used against those who are transgender. Women, it seems, don’t have

a monopoly on exclusion in the Church.

It doesn’t take much thought to see that binary talk is about desire and power. Opposites attract, opposites are a threat. Coakley argues that sexual desire shouldn’t be eliminated from theological reflection instead, for her, “Freud must be turned on his head,” because, “it is not that physical ‘sex’ is basic and God ephemeral; rather, it is God who is basic, and ‘desire’ the precious clue that ever tugs at the heart, reminding the human soul – however dimly – of its created source.”

She also insists that power, and its exercise – another expression of desire – has to be taken into account when we do theology. In a fascinating study, she shows how the early development of trinitarian thinking involved a “messy entanglement” of prayer, sexual desire and politics. Not so much of the dry and abstract speculation that often puts us off trinitarian formulations. A bit less *University Challenge* and a bit more *Game of Thrones*. At the heart of this was a deep experience of the Holy Spirit and the admitting of what one early source termed “wretched women” into positions of authority in the Church. As the Church advanced towards a more settled theology and a status of state religion, both the Spirit and the women proved difficult to manage and were edged off centre stage.

Both the Church hierarchy and the Trinity came to be seen as something

of a men’s club and issues of desire and of how we deal with both sexuality and power were muted as the Church settled into binary forms of thinking: Father and Son, Church and world. So I can see the attraction of introducing the feminine pronoun into talk of the triune God. As we have seen in our politics, there is something to be said for breaking up the men’s club. Even if it means admitting “wretched women”, or their modern equivalent (Ken Clarke’s “bloody difficult woman”) to positions of power.

But Coakley reminds us that “to add a ‘third’ in God is not to spice any possibly idolatrous or patriarchal twoness with a hint of ‘feminine’ promise”. The Holy Spirit is not there jostling for position with the Father and the Son. The vision of the Trinity is that there is harmony within God and the revisiting of the role and work of the Spirit in recent theology recognises our need to find an authentic vision of God that also enables us to view humans in ways that move beyond our binary thinking of power and sexuality.

Coakley, in common with other theologians such as Rowan Williams, revisits Romans 8 for a richer picture of God, in a text that is full of female imagery and strong on the language of yearning and desire. The Spirit is seen as drawing us into the relationship of the Trinity; nurturing in us the infant cry of “Abba, father” and admitting us into the “impossible practice” of prayer, which



is something that is happening within God. As Coakley puts it, prayer is not experienced as an autonomous act, nor “a simple communication between an individual and a divine monad” – rather, it is “a sort of answering of God to God in and through the one who prays,” through which the person in whom this prayer occurs is drawn into “the newly expanded life of ‘Sonship’.”

Coakley’s point is that we should not simply add a feminine pronoun to God, whether the radical calling of God ‘mother’, or the more acceptable terming of the Spirit as ‘she’. While this may help women feel that God is not a part of the patriarchal problem – or the problem writ large – it will not address the real issue. We really do need to recognise that God is different from us, God works differently. God doesn’t work through binary opposites and the exercise of hierarchical power.

“ God doesn’t work through binary opposites and hierarchical power ”

Even the most basic binary – God and the world – is overcome through the incarnation and the activity of the Spirit within Jesus and us. God works through drawing us into relationship, welcoming us into the very heart of the relations between Father, Son and Spirit. And all of our desires, and the broken ways in which we express them through our sexuality and the exercise of power, will be gradually healed through coming home to the (three in) one. None of us is a settled thing now, none of our desires are normal and right just now. All of us have issues

with gender, sexuality and power – myself as much as my Communion companion in the hospital bed – that will come to a surprising resolution when our desires are met through meeting with God.

There really isn’t a men’s club at the heart of God, and life, thankfully, isn’t as binary as we have been led to believe. Instead, God is a passionate fellowship of love and we all – and all of creation – find ourselves surprisingly welcome into this divine community. If using a feminine pronoun helps remind us of that, then I’m sure she’ll be delighted.

Paul Fiddes

*Director of Research and former Principal of Regent's Park College, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Oxford and former Chair of the Doctrine Commission of the Baptist World Alliance. Paul Fiddes is the author of *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*.*

WHAT WE GET WRONG ABOUT THE TRINITY

*THINKING THE TRINITY IS IRRELEVANT TO
CHRISTIAN LIFE IS THE FIRST MISTAKE.*

I'm excited, as a Christian believer and as a Christian theologian, about the doctrine of the Trinity. People get it wrong when they think this is an abstract idea, remote from the practicalities of daily life. They go astray when they regard talk of Trinity as a kind of optional extra to belief in Jesus Christ, the human face of God. Sometimes it seems even Christian people think the Trinity just a test of faith, one of the 'one hundred impossible things' that the White Queen in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* used to practise believing "before breakfast every morning".

They couldn't be more wrong. The Trinity is an immensely practical doctrine. It awakens us to notice that we live in a universe which is full of relationships. Everything is connected to everything else, and everyone is connected to everyone else, as the human and the physical sciences keep on telling us. Sometimes these relations lie deep beneath the surface or take unexpected forms. We often fail to see

these relations, or to respect and affirm others who relate to us. We find others to be strange and threatening, and we

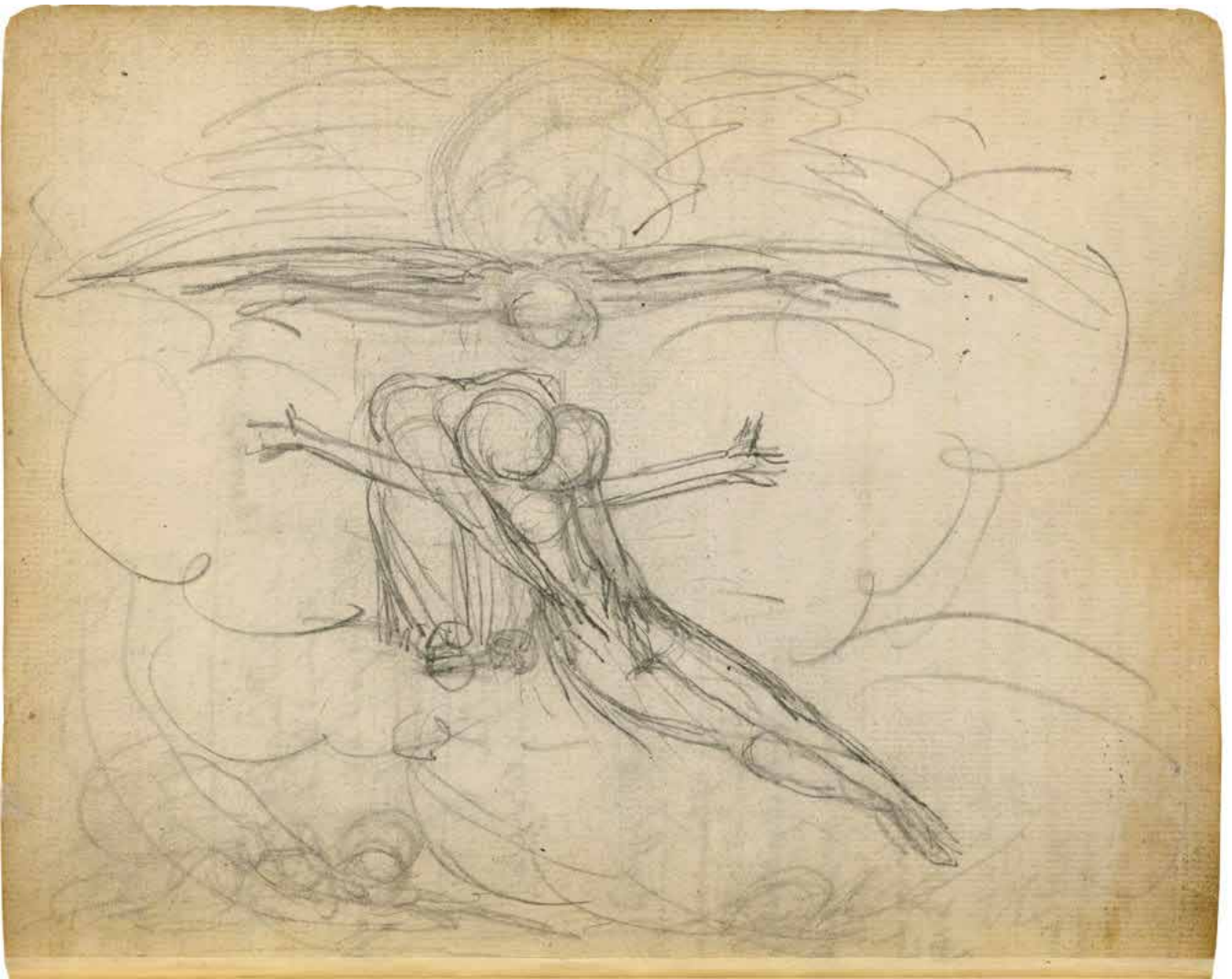


The Trinity, Jusepe de Ribera (1635) © Public domain

reject all the potentialities for relationship and a flourishing life that they offer us.

Trinity affirms that the creator of the universe lives in eternal relations of love, always giving and receiving love with an amazing generosity and compassion. So this supremely relational God can redeem all our broken relationships, between us and God and between each other.

When we ask what God is like, our human words will always stumble and falter. But Scripture and the witness of the Church urge us that the nearest we can get is to say that God is like a father who sends out a son on a mission of love and justice into the world, like a son who responds to this sending father in obedience and joy, bringing others with him to the father, and like a spirit of hope who is always opening up these relations to new depths and to a new future. The Trinity is the greatest story ever told, and we share in the story as we pray "to the Father, through



The Trinity Sketch, William Blake

the Son, in the Spirit". Then, just because our words do break down, we must immediately say all this over again in new ways, speaking, for example, of relations in God which are like those between a mother and a daughter. Early Christian theologians broke barriers of gender when they spoke of a God who was like a father, and yet who also eternally sent out a word of love and wisdom like a woman giving birth from her womb.

If people get the Trinity wrong by making it a doctrine remote from everyday life, they also get it wrong by turning it into a kind of numerical puzzle, as if we have to believe that God is one supreme being and three beings at the same time. The Trinity isn't celestial mathematics, but the love at the heart of the universe.

On the one hand, there is only one God, but this God is not a single absolute being who dominates us and keeps us in line like a cosmic dictator, especially a male one. We can only think and speak

“ The Trinity isn't celestial mathematics, but the love at the heart of the universe ”

about God by being drawn into the different relations in which the one God lives. On the other hand, as the early Christian theologian Augustine put it, when we say 'three persons', we only say 'person' in order 'not to say nothing at all'.

Talk of 'three persons in one God' is not about a group of heavenly beings, but a way of alerting us to the possibility of sharing in movements of love and justice already going on, which are like the relations between people that we know in our world, and yet which also gloriously exceed what we know. We can't observe God and say: "so that's what God looks like," but we can participate in God and

say: "so that's what it's like to share in God's life."

All this means that we know God as Trinity through actually sharing in the relations of everyday life – relations between parents and children, between fellow disciples, between siblings and friends, between citizens, between foreigners and strangers, and between humans and the whole natural world. As we enter these relations we find that we are being immersed into a greater flow of relations, or swept up into relations that are richer, deeper, more hopeful, and more faithful than our own. We are living in the Trinity.

relationships we have, or have had.

The doctrine of the Trinity, with its awkward insistence on three relations rather than the more comfortable twosome, may nudge us in the direction of realising that our own identity as persons involves not simply our 'you and me' relationships, but also our indirect relationships, those we refer to as 'he', 'she' or 'them'. Even those we shun or close out are part of the dynamic of our personal identity. This becomes transparent at times – for example, racism conveys an identity shaped by exclusion or refusal.

Relationships with those who are different to us, that is all others, are fundamentally formative to our personal identities. And yet we are often clumsy and artless in our dealings with difference. We habitually deal with difference in terms of contrast, setting things up in a two-way opposition: men and women, black and white, citizen and foreigner, Christian and Muslim, religious and atheist, straight and gay, left and right, 'Leaver' and 'Remainer'. Right and wrong. Our way with difference is adversarial.

This, of course, has vocational implications for the Church in terms of mission and spirituality. Our tendency to resolve difference through assimilation or expulsion, as though peace required uniformity, has been detrimental to outreach and theology alike, and disastrous for our spirituality. This is because we are, in a very real sense, a place of meeting, a relational intersection, even with regard to those we marginalise or exclude. No wonder reconciliation is the heart of the gospel.

The notion of God as 'relations without remainder' is not immediately comprehensible. Paul Fiddes picks this up in his book on the Trinity, *Participating in God*, when he states, "We cannot observe, even in our mind's eye, being that is relationship; it can only be known through the mode of participation." Participation rather than observation becomes here a means of knowing, while participation instead of isolation is a more authentic way of being. This is a trinitarian way of dealing with difference. It means, at the very least, that our conversations cannot be stale, linear and sequential exchanges of speech and hearing in which we mark out the ground of our idealised identity and at the same time mark the cards of those who differ from us. Conversations



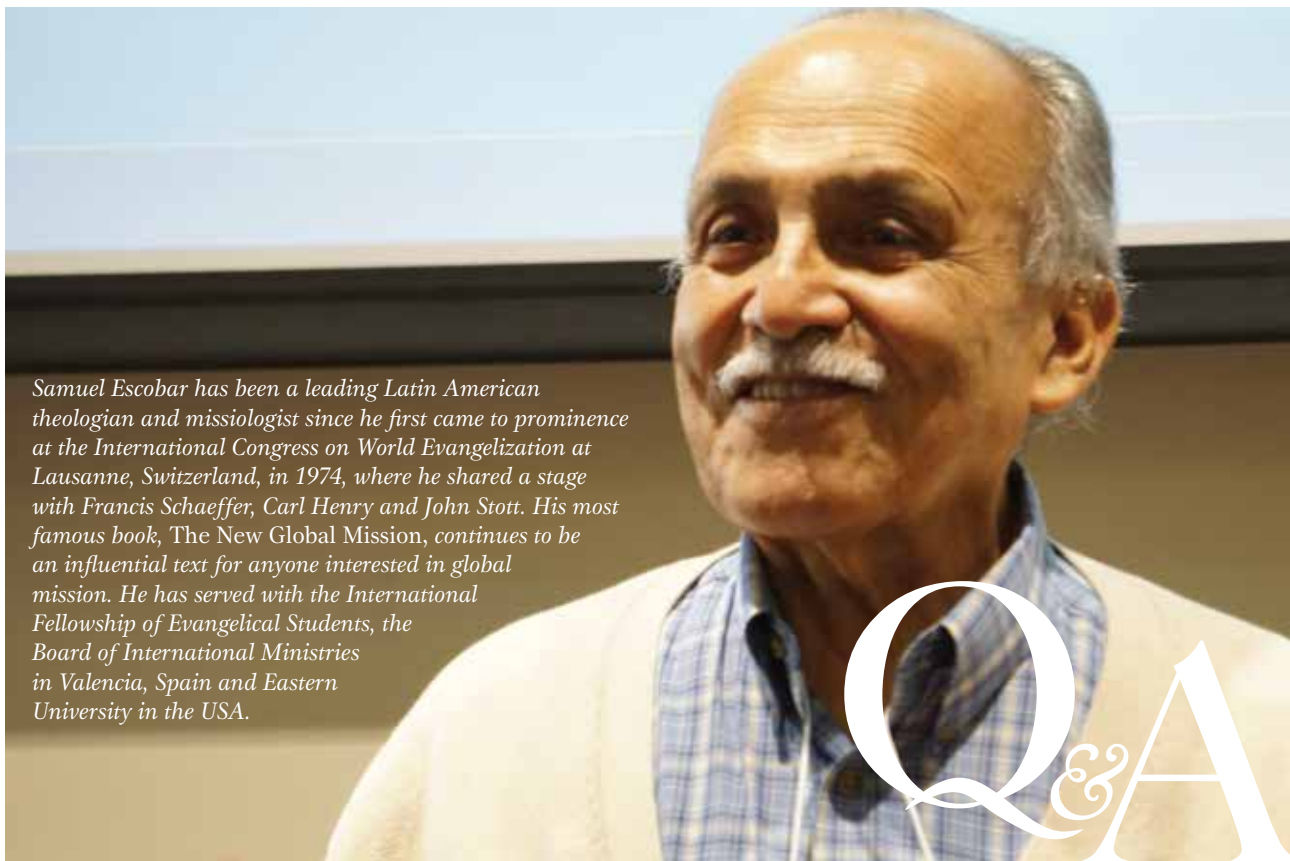
Trifacial Trinity, Anonymous Cusco School (1750 - 1770) © Public domain

“ Resolving difference through assimilation or expulsion has been disastrous for spirituality ”

will be, instead, inhabited affairs that mark us and in which we find ourselves. It means that we shall have to learn to let two different notes sound at the time, without quashing one in favour of the other. That is the only way to harmony.

Maybe the practice of participation would not resolve all disputes and

perhaps it is not possible to hold all differences together in a peaceable fashion, but certainly it would take our witness to Christ, and our baptism in name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as a starting point for dealing with difference.



*Samuel Escobar has been a leading Latin American theologian and missiologist since he first came to prominence at the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974, where he shared a stage with Francis Schaeffer, Carl Henry and John Stott. His most famous book, *The New Global Mission*, continues to be an influential text for anyone interested in global mission. He has served with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, the Board of International Ministries in Valencia, Spain and Eastern University in the USA.*

SAMUEL ESCOBAR

THE LAUSANNE THEOLOGIAN AND CATALYST LIVE 2016 SPEAKER TALKS
ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN MISSION AND HOW WE MUST
NOT NEGLECT THE PRACTICAL REALITY OF THIS MEMBER OF THE TRINITY.

Social trinitarianism has come under sustained critique over the last few years. Do you think that the relations of the Trinity can provide some sort of pattern for social relations, either in the Church or in the wider society?

Yes, there is definitely a connection in this way of understanding the Trinity – a teaching about the way we understand the life of the Church today. Because if we believe in a God in whose very nature

there is this relationship of this quality, we are called to be a people in which there is, as the basic element, this relationship of equality. It is interesting in chapter 10 of Luke, when Christ sends his disciples on a missionary trip and they return very happy and surprised that some things they didn't expect have taken place. And Jesus says, "Don't rejoice in those things. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In other words, rejoice in who you are, not

so much in the success of your missionary effort, but in the fact that the source of your joy will be your relationship with the Father. And then Luke goes on to say that in that moment Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said the words of his identity with his Father. And I think that is beautiful.

And you think that this model of social relations is helpful for us as Christians?

Definitely.

What do you see as the main contribution of trinitarian theology to the work of mission?

Trinitarian theology helps us to be attentive to God's action and God's will in the world today for his Church. The challenges that migration brings to churches in Europe are challenges for the Church to discover that mission has to happen at home as well as abroad. And that it is important that the life of the Church in London has the qualities of the Church in this African or Asian nation or in this Middle Eastern situation to which we send missionaries from London. That mission is important at the door, as well as across the sea.

Some might say that historically, western trinitarian theology has been more about understanding the nature of God than understanding the nature of mission. Is that a weakness in western theology?

I use as an example what happened to us in Latin America. In 1970, responding to the social crisis in the Americas in light of the Cuban revolution and the challenge of Marxism, *et cetera*, we founded the Latin American Theological Fraternity. This was an effort to respond, to articulate an understanding of faith, taking into account the social reality of Latin America. We prepared a kind of foundational document. All we say in that document about the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit helps us to understand God's Word today. That is the only statement that we had about the Holy Spirit, we evangelical Latin American theologians. And at the same time, we were living in a continent where there was an expansion of evangelism and missionary action that was incredible. In other words, the Holy Spirit was doing tremendous things in Latin America, but all that we said was that the Holy Spirit helps us understand the Word of God. We were not aware, but now of course that has changed. In the most recent assemblies of our Latin American Theological Fraternity, there have been papers, studies, discussions and Bible studies about the Holy Spirit because we believe that the Holy Spirit is in action in Latin America.

In your book, *The New Global Mission*, you talk of the Holy Spirit as "the chief actor... the director of the whole enterprise". What do you mean by this? Are there dangers in not seeing the Father as the director, or Jesus as the main actor?

You know that the theological debates

about God – about the functions of the different persons of the Trinity – have been the subject of much debate, efforts of clarification *et cetera*. But I go back to Scripture, and Scripture does not go back into those speculations. It simply says 'so

the burning heart that was decisive in his ministry later on. And I know of similar cases, of a person who has become aware of the drive to do this, or to respond in this way, to a new situation, it comes from the Spirit, it comes from the Lord.

“ I DON'T SPECULATE ABOUT THE SUBTLETIES OF WHICH PERSON OF THE TRINITY IS IN ACTION ”

and so was filled by the Spirit and because of that he did...'. Like in the gospel of Luke, you have Simeon and Anna, two old people, who realise here is Jesus, here is the Messiah and in both cases, it is the presence of the Spirit in their lives which explains that. Luke tells it without elaboration. And there are other cases where he says, 'And Peter, filled by the Spirit, stood up and said this and that' – in other words, if mission happened it was because the Spirit was in action. It's God – the Spirit is in action because God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten son.

So, you're saying God the Father is the director and is using the Holy Spirit to reveal things to people?

I'm saying that God is in action. I don't speculate about the subtleties of which person of the Trinity is in action. What I think is important is to recognise that when the role of the Holy Spirit has been acknowledged, the missionary impulse, the missionary spirit of the Church has been revived.

It is interesting, you know, that until the middle of the 18th century, most of the missionary work in the world was done by the Catholic orders. Protestantism started in the middle of the 18th century and it started in circles where there was a new experience, a new awareness of the Holy Spirit like the Moravians. I always like the story of John Wesley going to Georgia on mission and being afraid of death because there was a storm, and watching the Moravians, who were going on mission also, watching them singing and praying without fear and wanting to have the same. So when he came back from North America, the first thing he did was that he went to the Moravian church and that is where he had the experience of

Is understanding the Trinity a mystery that we perhaps cannot fully comprehend, but the most important thing is understanding the importance of the Holy Spirit in mission?

Yes, but also I think it is important to remember that in the teaching of Jesus in the gospel of John, he says that the Holy Spirit will teach about him about Jesus, and will guide the Church to the truth about Jesus. And so, the way we measure mission is Christological to the degree to which there are people being transformed by the experience of knowing Christ – these experiences prove that it comes from the Spirit, that it makes us more like Christ. That is the way we measure.

Where might we find Global South theologies of the Trinity bearing fruit today?

I think there is a new awareness about the Holy Spirit. There have been many debates, and I see that amongst some Protestant denominations there is a strong orthodoxy. I think that sometimes orthodoxy is just a kind of intellectualism which is devoid of the new kind of life which is made possible by the acceptance of the reality of the Holy Spirit in our lives today. That he doesn't only help us to remember the truth, but he helps us to live it today, and to have in our lives the changes that are necessary to be more like Christ and to become sensitive to the ways that God is asking his Church to be truly his Church today.

Samuel Escobar will be speaking at Catalyst Live 2016. He was speaking to Chris Hall.



The Trinity

Endless screeds and tomes have been written about the Trinity over the history of the Christian Church. Here are a few worth considering.

THE GO-BETWEEN GOD

Bishop J V Taylor

The description 'a Christian classic' can be used too easily but here it is appropriate. Now 40 years old, this is not a theology of Trinity in a narrow sense but is beautifully trinitarian in terms of helping us know God in creation, in redemption and in mission.

ON THE TRINITY

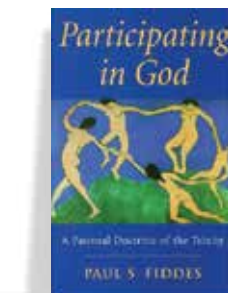
Augustine of Hippo

Champion of the 'Latin' or 'non-social' trinitarian view and all round theological legend, St Augustine delves deep and long into the subject. The starting point for much theologically systematic thinking on the Trinity.

PARTICIPATING IN GOD: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity

Paul S Fiddes

Baptist champion of 'relational trinitarianism' (if uncomfortable with the term 'social trinitarian'), Fiddes' work here is compelling, thorough and profound.



CHRIST AND THE COSMOS

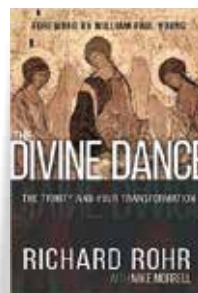
Keith Ward

Pastors preach easily on the distinct persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but often sacrifice the absolute, non-negotiable of God as one, indivisible being. Ward tackles this in a complex and demanding, but ultimately rewarding book. Best for those with a theology background.

TWO VIEWS ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Stephen Holmes, Paul Molnar, Thomas McCall, Paul Fiddes, Jason Sexton, Stanley Gundry

An excellent overview by a diversity of authors exploring the resurgence of trinitarian theology, both traditional and social.



GOD, SEXUALITY, AND THE SELF

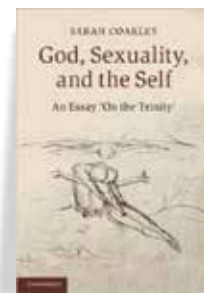
Sarah Coakley

Questioning assumptions on gender and sexuality, Coakley places the Holy Spirit at the centre of her trinitarian theology, with reference to the trinity in art and contemporary Church.

THE QUEST FOR THE TRINITY

Stephen Holmes

This book is an excellent place both to gain an understanding of the historical development of classical trinitarian theology, the developments in thinking in the last 100 years, and the tensions that lie between the two. This will remain a valued reference book for years to come.



A FORMULATION AND DEFENSE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

William Lane Craig

The US-based Christian philosopher and apologist gives a theological, historical and philosophical defence of 'social' trinitarianism for his ReasonableFaith.org blog. The extract is in this issue of *Catalyst*. The full version can be found at <http://bit.ly/2bk6ms9>

DIVINE DANCE: The Trinity and Your Transformation

Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell
"The only people who appreciate the Trinity are people who pray," says Richard Rohr. The Franciscan author's latest book explores the Trinity in his inimitable style.

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Managing Editor: David Kerrigan Editor: Jonathan Langley Design: Malky Currie

BMS World Mission, PO Box 49, 129 Broadway, Didcot, Oxfordshire, OX11 8XA. Website: bmsworldmission.org

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