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The Doctrine of the Trinity—The Major Stumbling Block in Inter-Religious Dialogue?

Reflections on the Methodological Function of Theological Concepts

Ulrike Link-Wieczorek

Translated by Duncan Reid

Introduction

As a point of entry into inter-religious dialogue, the doctrine of the Trinity does not seem to offer much help. In any case not if we start from the presupposition that such a point of entry can be based on commonalities. We could for example think of speech about revelation as the appropriate entry point for Christian-Muslim dialogue, since talk about revelation is to be found in both religions. But it is wise to be cautious with words that sound the same. Pim Valkenberg for example warns us that superficial commonality of concepts can quickly lead onto thin ice, as behind such commonalities can lurk significant differences.[1] We are already familiar with this problem on a smaller scale from inter-Christian ecumenical dialogue. Above all it shows us that our terms do not necessarily function as we would expect outside of our contexts, both local and extended. Pim Valkenberg points out that even within intra-Christian dialogue a propositional understanding of revelation is by no means unproblematic. We can go a step further: it is not only the

1. Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God.*

linguistic expression that is only superficially the same when talking about revelation—it could be the experience as well. We are familiar with this problem in the discussion of "mystical" experience, which supposedly underlies all religions. Representatives of the American analytical philosophy of religions especially, like for example, Steven T. Katz, are very critical of this concept.[2] In different religious "language-games" the experiences themselves are necessarily different—only superficially do they sound the same. In fact each tradition means something quite different by this term: GOD.

We tend to regard the doctrine of the Trinity as a point that stands firmly against such false homogenization. Here we have to do, according to this presupposition, first and last with a great difference. We do not need to scratch on a seemingly unified surface here to discover the differences. They are immediately apparent, in fact as typologically sharp-edged as the differences that Pim Valkenberg can trace underneath the surface of unity. Concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, the differences from Judaism and Islam stick out above the surface: on the one hand, in Judaism and Islam, a clearly monotheistic picture of God, on the other, a complicated trinitarian one, that constantly runs the risk of no longer being regarded as monotheistic. The typology is to be seen even more clearly in the language of Christian confessional statements: there, a distanced monotheism, a God who is inaccessibly transcendent; here, a God who comes near in many and varied ways. There, in Judaism and Islam, a distant God; here, in Christianity, an intimate, approachable God. If you enter into inter-religious dialogue, according to the advice of confessional Christianity, you had better not forget the doctrine of the Trinity, for only then will you be able to show your true face as a Christian believer, and—last but not least—the true face of God. In inverse relation to its comprehensibility—and who really does understand it?—in intra-Christian discourse, for example on a confessional level, the doctrine of the Trinity becomes for inter-religious dialogue the badge of Christian identity as such. This is a paradoxical picture. Within Christianity the doctrine of the Trinity—in any case outside of academic discourse—is felt to be too complicated to be helpful to reflect one's own belief. On the other hand it will be pressed upon us by Christian dogmatists as a necessary travel pack if we want to enter into inter-religious dialogue.

2. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions.*

In what follows I would like to attempt a passage of this Scylla and Charybdis. For this reason I will develop an interpretation of the Trinity as contemplative speech. To support this claim I shall begin with a thesis outlining the relevance and significance of the economic Trinity. This will be complemented by an excursus about the Jewish theology of the name of God by which we will then be led to an understanding of trinitarian theology as a way of contemplating the vitality of God. The third section will reflect upon the consequences of this approach for interreligious dialogue.

The Trinity as a "Thick" Experience of God

Christian discourse about a trinitarian God has to be understood above all to refer to belief in the identity of the God of Israel and Jesus Christ. Its intention is the bracketing together of Jewish and Christian God-talk, not about their demarcation. It is to be understood as a theological formula of the belief in the opening of the Covenant of Israel to the Gentiles, and has its roots in the so-called *economic* Trinity.

If we look at the history of the emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity in the first four centuries of the early church, we notice that it is embedded in the search for an adequate way of talking about Jesus Christ. It served as a clarification of a particular understanding of God, as it has emerged from reflection about Jesus Christ. It is intended to give expression to, as well as the understanding of Jesus Christ, the biblical proclamation of God's salvific actions (*Heilswirken*) in Israel, in Jesus Christ and in the present life of the church. So understood, the three-membered structure of God-talk emerges first from its own history, out of the insight that the various biblically engendered experiences of God have to be seen as bracketed together, so to speak clearly of the one and the same God.[3] This means neither more nor less than this: without the doctrine of the Trinity the Old Testament would not belong to the Christian Bible. The insight that God is, in a trinitarian way, One, rests on a bracketing together of the various forms of God-talk with the one God-talk, a bracketing that is implicitly already to

3. Ritschl, *Logic of Theology*, 141. "It (the doctrine of the Trinity) arises out of the present worship of God and exerts pressure towards putting thoughts about the Spirit in the church in a separate compartment with the appearance and activity of Jesus and the God of Israel and creator of worlds."

be found in the Scripture. Despite all contrary interpretations in the history of Christianity, the doctrine of the Trinity rests on the implicit biblical axiom that the God of the Jews is none other than the God of the Gentiles.

Thus we could ask whether it really is plausible to contend that the doctrine of the Trinity as such represents a symptom of the distancing of Christians from the Jews. From a Christian point of view in any case, this cannot be the case. I want now to establish this point in the following excursus, with reference to the discourse about God in the Hebrew Bible.

Excursus: Biblical Theology of the Name of God as an Equivalent to Trinitarian God-Talk

A theological theory always seems especially plausible if its intention is recognizable in other theological themes. For an explanation of the trinitarian theological axiom proposed here, we can refer to another domain of theological speech about God, one that, incidentally, is significant for Karl Barth. This is the biblically grounded theology of the name of God. In what is to follow I refer to the relevant discussion by Christian Link, who explicates this theology with a constant sideways glance to Karl Barth's doctrine of the Trinity.[4] The comparison is particularly interesting because we can observe here a basic polarity that also will play a role in the doctrine of the Trinity. In his article, Link demonstrates how the biblical theology of the name of God is largely characterized by the idea that God gives up his own "selfness" in giving his name, so that it is known who God is, but that the significance of God's name is only made manifest in the concrete process of the covenant history, although the name of God is already known. And further still: insofar as God gives his name in the history of his people, God makes himself absolutely dependent upon its course, from the manner of the particular concrete calling and the interaction with God's glory—although it would be wrong to suggest that it was the people of Israel who gave God this name. The giving up of the name is the initiative of God, and this calls and draws the covenant people into the common

4. Link, "Die Spur des Namens," 37–66. In Christian Link I refer to a German theologian who, as an outstanding expert in the theology of Karl Barth, also emphasizes precisely the possibility of explicating a Christian dialogue with Judaism.

history in quest of the name. It remains the trace of the name of God, but it takes up the one who walks in His glory. The truth of God remains God's truth, also and exactly then, when it has "bound itself to the ways in which God walks."[5] It is a dynamic of freedom and dependence that is fundamental here, in which the freedom of God the plainly loving one is that which implies a self-chosen dependence and vulnerability and in this way creates relationship. This freedom is therefore not easy to describe, and even less to conceptualize. It is this conceptual dynamic that gives the form of expression to the vitality of God. In the words of Christian Link, in reference to Eberhard Jüngel's famous book on Karl Barth's theology: "Far removed from being absorbed in the conceptual content of an idea of God, He [the God of Israel] determines his own divine being in the journey of his people, as being 'in becoming.'"[6]

Now I would like to move from this reflective sketch on the theology of the name of God to an understanding of the concept of the Trinity that takes the trinitarian God-talk to be a different form of expression for the same living God-tension. The conceptual tension between unity and plurality and between the immanent and economic Trinity is the mould into which the doctrine of the Trinity is, as it were, poured and formed, and this confirms that it speaks of the same God. The biblical theology of the name of God contains this same tension, so I would like to develop Christian Link's explorations further by way of the combination of three governing expressions:

SELF-REVELATION

The stories of the Old Testament carry the imprint that God is not named by human beings on the basis of their experiences, but that God names God's own name. God himself thus shapes the relationship in which God's name may/should/can be invoked, and by which, inasmuch as we may presume to name God, God reveals his might and glory (*kabod*).

5. Ibid., 50.
6. Ibid., 49.

CONCEALMENT

The name by which God names Godself is at the same time distinctly "nameless."[7] "I am who I am and who I shall be" eludes a conceptual formula, and in the same breath in which Jahweh names his own name, he abandons it as a name for invocation (Exod 6:3) and warns against looking on his face (Exod 33:12–33). God refuses to let himself be "locked in" by the invocation of human beings.[8]

ACTUALIZATION

Exactly what the name of God means is made known only in the history with God in which at first he involves himself, allowing himself to be invoked and named, by his correspondingly nameless name, in a concrete situation. Everything that can be said about the experience of God is anchored here, and is therefore to be seen as the outworking of the covenant activities of God. The anthropomorphic way of naming and describing God in the Hebrew Bible is thus misunderstood if taken as purely mythological speech. It is the form in which concrete, actual speech about God can be exercised, and it is enabled through the nameless naming of God as the one who both accompanies and is always coming. Through this human beings, walking in the "trace" of the self-naming God, can find and call upon the concrete name of God in their concrete human and linguistic life of relationship.

The structural triad of self-revelation, concealment, and actualization forms a complex whole in which in the Hebrew Bible the vitality of God comes to expression, and from which creaturely life may come to know itself. If any one piece of this is removed, speech about God is deprived of its dynamism, and that means either trivialized or distorted. For example, if we retain the self-revelation without the concealment, then the actualization is rendered impossible and the name of God becomes an empty cipher. God's glory would be without vitality, and companionship with God would in the truest sense become unthinkable. If we retain concealment without the possibility of the actualization of naming, then God would be something vaguely numinous, exactly comparable to the God-talk that Barth feared in his critical comments

7. Ibid., 48, referring to Miskotte, *Wenn die Götter schweigen*, 128.

8. Ibid., 40–42.

on mysticism. Only through the three components together can it be shown how believers in the particular experience of God name the God of self-revelation, know God personally and know of God, without being able to name and describe God in general terms. Only in the combination of the three elements can it be highlighted that the "namelessness" of God is not, in the words of Christian Link, an "absence of concreteness as we are in the habit of thinking about contents or referents which remain anonymous. It is far more the condition for applying the most diverse names and to discern, in their history, the authentic 'trace' step by step."[9] With encouragement from Franz Rosenzweig, Link develops these thoughts further into the eschatological vision, that in the redemption God could also be redeemed from God's names, from their misuse as well as finally also from his revealed name as such.[10] This can be understood as the eschatological speculation of believers which is directed to the unity of God and in which the invocation of his names are experienced as the way to that unity. The work of theological construction then becomes the contemplation of God's truth, and that will also be rediscovered in the theology of the Trinity. So in the theology of the name of God in the Hebrew Bible a tension becomes clear between a general and a concrete form of speech about God, which is rooted in God's own involvement in the history of creatureliness. It is from within this framework that Christian Link refers to an old Jewish model of the bifurcation between God's self and God's name.[11] He discerns here a structure that foreshadows the New Testament language of the incarnation:

> [I]n the gift of the name and the will in which God allows his name to dwell in Israel, that is, to represent himself in a humanly comprehensible manner, already the basic form of the incarnation is established, not only the condescension but also the adoption of human nature. The event of the incarnation as presented in the gospels moves explicitly in this already prepared form as Karl Barth had already observed in his typical attention for intra-biblical coherence: "exactly into this place—not the Jahweh of Sinai or heaven, but finally the name of the Lord who

9. Ibid., 50.

10. Ibid., 50–51, with reference to Rosenzweig, *Stern der Erlösung*, 426–27.

11. Ibid., 59. For further development of this argument in reference to Karl Barth, see 51–54.

> dwelled in a stone temple in Jerusalem—into this place steps the human existence of Jesus of Nazareth."[12]

When, in the following reflection, the relation of the economic and immanent Trinity will be contemplated, so this will be done in this uncovered trace of the God-talk of Israel. In this perspective the triune naming of God in the history of salvation comes close to the threefold "self-repetition"—as it must in the history of the one who allows himself to be drawn into the concrete naming in the trace of the name of God. Triune naming of God is then seen as rooted in the history of actualizations of the name of God, insofar as Jesus of Nazareth is understood as the actualization of the name of God in the uncovered trace of his self-revelation. This means Jesus brings nothing new, but manifests the old in a new actualization. In the words of Christian Link, who plays on Karl Barth's trinitarian motif of the "repetition" of God, God in revelation becomes his own repetition (*Doppelgänger*).[13] "Thus nothing new is proclaimed here, but, so to speak, the most ancient and the first, the God who as 'once again another' God wants to be known as God, is proclaimed in all the world. In Jesus a 'new book of old stories' is opened."[14]

The Trinity as a "Thick" Experience of God [cont.]

Back to the doctrine of the Trinity. It can now be understood as a concept for holding together the three names of the God of Israel and the Gentiles. I would like to suggest as a consequence of this point of departure that we understand the discourse of three trinitarian "persons" as a *thick experience of God* in the trace of the name of God, of his self-naming reference. As in a sort of time travel, believers in Christ thereby span a spectrum from before until after this rediscovery of the ancient name of God, from before until after the Christ-event, as the fixed point for their perception of the presence of God. Their experience and naming of God is anchored in the fixed point of Christ as the name of God, and they relate it back to the presence of God in Israel as well as forward to their experiences of the *Christus praesens* in their own lives. In this

12. Ibid., 58–59, quotation from Barth from *CD* I/1, 318.

13. *CD* I/1, 316.

14. Link, "Spur des Namens," 59, citing Marquardt, *Das christliche Bekenntnis zu Jesus dem Juden*, 116, where reference is made to *CD* I/1, 319.

"time travel," differentiated biblical naming and metaphors for God are applied in order to express different principal highlights of God's presence: God as Father, for the beginning of Israel's experience of God, and as Creator; God the Son or the Word, for his decisive manifestation in the Christ-event, as Redeemer or the one who draws near; and God the Spirit, for God's driving and renewing dynamism. We could of course debate the question as to whether these metaphors represent the only possible options for representing in language the threefold fundamental experience of God. Feminist theologians are not alone in insisting that the first two metaphors, Father and Son, have indeed contributed to a harmfully masculine overemphasis in ecclesial speech about God.[15] And it may well be regrettable that Sophia, the figure of wisdom, has not been given greater weight.[16] The Jewish speculation mentioned above concerning the redemption of God from his names could encourage us to feel also the provisional nature of trinitarian speech as an enrichment, seeing this theological conceptualization now in the framework of the complexity of self-revelation, concealment, and actualization.

Beyond these problems of the linguistic and biblical dimensions of the doctrine of the Trinity, this remains definite: talk of Father, Son, and Spirit, as it has become the basic framework of trinitarian discourse, and as it recurs in our liturgy, this talk presents, so to speak, the surface structure for binding together the major themes of the experience of God's presence. Trinitarian speech can be traced back to the junction points of Christian experience of God, which understands itself in the light of the self-revelatory initiative of God as God given. It signifies "points of experience of the holy in the world."[17] When we place the emphasis of trinitarian speech on this level, so we speak of course of the so-called "economic" or "history-of-salvation" (*heilsgeschichtliche*) Trinity. This is so to say, a "Trinity from below," which hesitates to speak of further speculation about the relationships between the three modes of divine experience, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At most the Son and Spirit are seen here as missions of the Father, already active in creation but that in the Christ, event have occasioned a particularly effective manifestation

15. Janowski, "Trinität," 564–67. LaCugna, "The Baptismal Formula," 235–50.

16. See for example, Elizabeth A. Johnson's suggestion of speaking of Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia in *She Who Is*.

17. Wohlmuth, "Zum Verhältnis von ökonomischer und immanenter Trinität—eine These," 128.

of God and that occasion ongoing interaction between God and humanity.[18] At first, however, this trinitarian talk of God is merely implicit because purely economic speech about God hesitates absolutely to make statements about Godsself, about who God shows himself to be in this threefold bracketing. In agreement with Piet Schoonenberg, I would like to speak of the three "junction points" as constellations of experience of God. This is a reversal of the older perspective, from the human experience of God to junction points in God's experience in his history of relationships with human beings. This reversal makes allowance for biblical speech about God, as it had earlier imprinted itself on the theology of the name and in which Christian Link discerns a pre-figuring of the theology of the incarnation. It takes seriously the belief that God in his truth gives himself into the world, takes its "flesh" and allows himself to be affected by it—always however under the initiative of God, on whose account Piet Schoonenberg along with Karl Rahner reflects on God's changeability "to another," which does not diminish his identity.[19] This reversal of perspective throws light on the "who" question. At the very least it allows us to say that God allows himself to be affected in his own identity by his relationships with human beings. This is a hard and fast consequence of the belief in the incarnation which can be found over and over in the history of theology, and without whose insistent assertion the dynamic of God-talk could be lost.

18. Schoonenberg, *Der Geist, das Wort und der Sohn*; Schoonenberg, "Trinität—der vollendete Bund," 115–17.

19. Schoonenberg, *Wort*, 140–44; ibid., "Gott ändert sich am andern," 69–81. In principle, Schoonenberg makes the suggestion, with his emphasis on the concrete level of the economic Trinity, to speak of the *a priori* of God's initiative already in the bracketing of his action in the economic level and without speaking of the ontological priority of the immanent Trinity—exactly as in the theology of the name of God. Thus the gulf between him and Karl Barth seems to me not nearly as deep as is often thought. At any rate, Barth would not say the doctrine of the immanent Trinity is to be understood noetically. Rather it designates the structure of God's essence as revealed in the incarnation, and so represents a way of knowing in the wake of revelation—*fides quaerens intellectum*. This is none other than Schoonenberg's theology, which also presents the freedom of God in his loving-changeably unchangeableness, as the driving force of the sending source—in this sense explicitly as the one who comes: "in this we know that the initiative lies with God, and our prayers are an answer to that initiative" (*Wort*, 151). On Barth, see the enlightening analysis by Grube, *Unergründbarkeit Gottes?* 123–61.

Contemplation on the Vitality of God: Speech about the Immanent Trinity

The significance of immanent-trinitarian talk of God is contemplative and not propositional. It invites us into a contemplative point of access into a confession of belief in the vitality of God. As such it establishes the Christian starting point for each inter-religious dialogue.

Our first thesis has already attempted to express the idea that speech about the economic Trinity asserts the God of Israel to be also the God of the Gentiles. This in turn suggests the following questions: Has God in this history with Israel, Jesus, and the church perhaps then also developed further, and so changed? Was God's presence to the people of Israel as effective as it was in Christ? Or does he become the merciful God only with the Jesus experience, as our pupils in confirmation classes apparently still learn? Does the acknowledged different experience of God thus also suggest a different quality of God's presence?

This, or something similar, is how we may imagine the question that led finally to the formation of speech about the "immanent" Trinity. Here we can surely discern at the very least a difference in outlook between Judaism and Christianity. For where, in the theology of the name the concealment, the "namelessness" of God is allowed to stand as such, within the knowledge of God's name, Christian theological effort proceeds, albeit with considerable caution, to operate with provisionally established names for God. Now we begin in fact to say more than the biblical text. There is a "language gain" in the contemplation of God.[20] The reason for this is the fundamental confession: as God makes his intentions known to us in Jesus Christ, and allows himself to be named by us as the God of Israel and the Gentiles, so can we most adequately speak about God. In short: as God shows himself to be in Christ, so he also is. As he gives himself in his name, and as he gives himself in Jesus Christ, so may we take this name as truly his real name. The contention in the early church about the doctrine of the Trinity has its basis in this believing confession. This concerns the essence of God: inadequate concepts are excluded, and with them any anxiety we might feel about the possibility that God may be different from what he has shown himself to be in his struggle for justice and abundant life in Jesus Christ. As God shows himself to be and allows himself to be named *ad extra*, in

20. Ritschl, *Logic of Theology*, 174.

the economic Trinity, so he really has to be, as, so to speak, immanent Trinity. Perhaps we feel compelled by God's coming in Jesus to say more about his being, about the name, than we did earlier, so as not to let the actualization of the Christ name simply explain itself. Considered on its own, this name would simply be the name of a "new God"—and this is exactly how Christology is (mis)understood by Jews and Muslims. In order to counteract this misunderstanding we want now to say clearly: God's *ad extra*, God's "outside," should not be thought of as a consequence of his temporal-spatial contingence, but must be traced back to his authentic original self-revealing intention in the giving of his name. The development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early church follows the insight that behind the epistemological *a priori* of the economic, salvation-history doctrine of the Trinity, there stands an implicit ontological *a priori* of God in Godself. This finds its expression in the concept of the immanent Trinity.[21] The junction points of the experience of God are established by Godself, and are by no means arbitrary. This is what is intended by speech about the immanent Trinity.

However, the decisions regarding the Trinity at the Council of Constantinople in 381 seem far too provocatively formal and abstract: one being, three hypostases or persons, which are equally fully divine and to be distinguished through their differentiated modes of procession, either begotten or breathed out. Think about God in this way, the three great Cappadocians teach us, as if God's three differentiated hypostases were constantly dancing with one another in a perichoretic embrace. New patristic work by the Anglican scholar Sarah Coakley highlights the fact that this can only work if all the hypostases *will* the same thing, if there is just one will, in other words.[22] Therein lies the legitimacy of all trinitarian fantasies based on one divine Subject. If it were not one will, it would be no dance, but some sort of wild ruckus. Indeed we could expand this: it would be no dance at all if the one will did not nourish itself in mutuality. Be that as it may, following the lead

21. See the careful wording of Wohlmuth, *Ökonomischer und immanenter Trinität*, 135 n. 17: "Thoughtful faith must not be allowed to flatten out the points of salvation history experience into the logic of time and space, but has to come to them in their trinitarian otherness, i.e., as irreducible revelation, and become familiar with the threefold proximity of the absolute mystery as inextinguishable personal event."

22. On Gregory of Nyssa's emphasis on the unity of the trinitarian will as a counterweight to the threeness of the persons, see Coakley, "Persons in the 'Social' Doctrine of the Trinity," 123–44, esp. 131.

of the Cappadocians we can speculate about the one and the three, but nothing is said about the suffering of God, nothing of God's loving-kindness, of God's insistence on justice. In short, nothing is said about anything substantive! Have we here yet another aspect of the concealment of God, which is carried along within the theology of the name of God? Are we not sent back here to the level of actualization, exactly as in the theology of the name? In any case we can say this: speech about God's immanent trinitarian being as a consequence of the biblically testified experience of God is to be seen initially as a rule of speech, as a formula that should help us correctly to hold together the wide variety of biblically testified experiences of God. We can say further: Jewish talk hesitates at exactly this speech rule, in any case at its explication, and Christian theology takes heed of the Jewish warning against the heretical self-explanation of this actualization, at least to a limited extent, by the taste of concealment of God which can be observed in the theology of the Cappadocians. We can sense the black hole of actualization because without content from the economic level it remains abstract.

This is also the case even if we find it necessary to seek clarity from the name of Jesus Christ on the immanent level, because otherwise the economic names would be no longer discernible as names of the One God. Indeed we can also give content to the formula of the immanent Trinity insofar as it is explicitly placed in relation to the biblically testified language of the history of salvation. The rule tells us, however, that this content is always directed substantively towards the One God, who has entered into a history of relationship with human beings. Only in this context does the "speech gain" (Ritschl) of the doctrine of the Trinity become clear. It is regrettable that this connection has been greatly obscured over the course of time because theology moved directly to speaking about the immanent Trinity without creative content. This in turn meant the relational and historical dimensions were lost, and instead an isolated immanent Trinity was offered as the only content of proclamation. To speak of the difficulty of the doctrine of the Trinity then means in fact to speak of the difficulty of holding together speech about the economic and immanent Trinity.[23]

23. On the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity see Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise *De Trinitate*," 77–102, especially 89; see also Jüngel, "Das Verhältnis von 'ökonomischer' und 'immanenter' Trinität," 265–75. For the *a priori* of the economic Trinity see Schoonenberg, *Trinität*. For an opposing position,

The speech rule does however seem to point to something substantive. It is in the tension between unity and diversity that the bracketing function of the Trinity becomes visible. It now becomes "characteristic" of God, and both aspects recur within the history of the doctrine of the Trinity: a constant stumbling block, and yet also a constant inspiration to creative God-talk—a final repetition (*Doppelgänger*) to the inner dynamic of the theology of the name of God.

It is interesting that as much in church congregations as in the academic sphere there is the experience that people very often in the first instance have a static defensiveness to the doctrine of the Trinity. But when they get the opportunity to visualize the unity and diversity, and think through this, do they very often become filled with eagerness. They find themselves wanting to play with different models in which this tension comes to expression. It seems to me that this can itself give rise to an experience, to an event of knowing as a growing sensitivity for the perception of complexity. Experiences of complexity awaken experiences of complexity in life, in our own stories and of the complexity of God. We can also relive this experience in reading Augustine's book on the Trinity. It is even possible that our anxiety in the face of complexity can be dismantled by this thought experiment. Bound up with such God-talk comes growth in our trust in God.

We can experience these encounters with the doctrine of the Trinity when above all it is designated as a contemplative speech form, but in no way as propositional speech. The theology of Jürgen Moltmann can be drawn in for such a reconsideration.[24] As is well known, it offers a basic change in perspective: the threefold structure of the Trinity is here used expressly to speak of God as a plurality who in his missions directly "creates history." But also beyond the trinitarian missions the Trinity is three-personed as a community of subjects. Moltmann runs the risk here in being understood to be uncompromisingly tritheistic. Only slightly exaggerated, we could hear him saying that God is a subject as a plurality and relationality of subjects, and so we should also be, and God helps us in this endeavor. In Europe, in North and South America, and also in Asia concepts of the Trinity are emerging that sug-

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moving from the immanent Trinity, see Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott: Eine trinitarische Theologie*, 317–25.

24. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God.*

gest a binding community.[25] This shift in perspectives, with differentiation and relationality at its center, promotes a picture of God as a God who is constantly dynamic, always in movement, and who insists on being in relation. I can myself well remember how stirring I found the discovery of this social dimension of the Trinity was during my own student years.

Interestingly, and contemporaneous with this development, we can find another way which also wants to emphasize the vitality of God. It recommends an almost complete dissociation from any speech about the immanent Trinity and suggests an economic Trinity as process. The triunity of God appears here as a great collective movement of Son and Spirit sent from the Father, and which makes sense only in this movement directed *ad extra*. The American Catholic theologian Catherine LaCugna is an example: in Godself we may not think of God as triune. Rather, God is, in Godself, mystery.[26] She can appeal here to Gregory of Nyssa, and work with his notion of the "infinite mystery" of God.[27] In both cases the immanent triunity is avoided, and in its place the early church dictum taken with absolute seriousness; that God's *ousia* is not to be seen. Mystery, unchangeability, and infinity here stand for discourse about the ineffability of God, which however does not lead to unknowability or further transcendence. Again we find here the element of concealment in this theology, typical of the theology of the name of God, along with dovetailing the knowledge of the self-revelation and actualization of God. In this frame of thought the immanence of God remains open from below, in that an insight is given into God's movements of sending and gathering—which for these writers alone count for God's triunity. In the reception of this theological concept a remarkable effect emerges: we are led into a movement of thought and contemplation in which we find ourselves only very fleetingly thinking about God as a three-personed Essence. It is no picture that presents itself here of three persons gathered around a table, or indeed dancing around one another. From those associations live the contemplation, on the part of Moltmann and others, of the vitality of God. They have

25. For background see, Link-Wieczorek, "Trinitätslehre, Protestantische Tradition und ökumenische Diskussion," 974–80; and Maurer, "Tendenzen neuerer Trinitätslehre," 3–24.

26. LaCugna, *God for Us*.

27. Ritter, "Dogma und Lehre in der Alten Kirche," 205–6.

to concede that each "person" in the doctrine of the Trinity is to be associated with an individual "subject," and thereby offers major cause for far-reaching tri-theistic misunderstanding. The movement of mission and gathering, on the other hand, draws on the image of an overflowing source, the abundance of life in which the association of the threeness of the Trinity functions as a marker of a "thick" or condensed means of access, which will finally pass away again in the flow of God's vitality. It allows us to think of God as a subject who neither disintegrates immediately into a threeness but who also is not simply a closed autonomous entity, but who pushes backward in his self-gathering, being in Godself pure dynamism and vitality. So at this point I would like to offer a proposal.

A Proposal: Trinitarian Persons as Openings to Contemplation

In the final chapter of his inspiring little 1968 book on the theology of the Holy Spirit, Hendrikus Berkhof recommends not using the term "persons" in our trinitarian talk of God any longer.[28] Despite many learned treatises and attempts at clarification in theology and philosophy, it is just too ambiguous. It is exactly here that we sense being misunderstood in inter-religious dialogue. Berkhof can be seen together with the attempts of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner precisely to avoid using the term "persons" but to talk instead about "modes of being" or "modes of subsistence." What we hear in this term "person," or rather how we evidently hear it used in our everyday communication, is clearly not the same as it was in the understanding of the ancient world. That is why Barth and Rahner thought their alternatives—"modes of being" or "modes of subsistence"—to be less misleading to our ears today. Above all they believed that their alternative terms would precisely reflect the intention of the classical doctrine of the Trinity. "Person" in the modern sense, characterized by total self-relatedness, is precisely not what was intended. Trinitarian "persons" should indeed shine a critical light onto this self-centric notion of the person. This is exactly about the vision of a different kind of personhood—intuiting a relationship to God and hoping more and more for the final perfection of the world. It is the

28. Berkhof, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 111.

vision of persons who constitute themselves only by relating to others in the light of God. This kind of person will become apparent in the encounter with God, because God is personal, in exactly this way. This is, as we must say, exactly what the so-called social doctrine of the Trinity wants to say with its terminology. This is what is intended by talk about the plurality of interconnected trinitarian persons.

Anyone who has studied theology knows this, and handles language more carefully. At least this is what they will have learned; that in theology some things do not mean exactly what they seem to mean. Anyone who attends Christian worship frequently may well have learned this, too. Or indeed anyone who has had the experience of prayer and understood that the Holy Spirit must make itself known, to give meaning to the words. What I want to say is this: that it takes a certain exercise to be able to understand the nature of the theological speculation to which talk about the three persons of the Trinity can invite us. It is a provocative game of varying nuances in the notion of the "person," especially if, despite every objection of Barth's, Rahner's, and Berkhof's, the plurality of three persons is to be emphasized once again by Moltmann and others in the social doctrine of the Trinity.

What is happening here is ultimately theological contemplation.[29] It seems to me that we are invited here to a never-ending and always-to-be-perfected movement of knowing. First there is the irritating suggestion of three Gods: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—this suggestion is there and will remain, even if we do know that it is not at all meant like this. It will also remain so because we know that it can be heard like this. After the irritation follows the correction (hopefully): no, three Gods are *not* what is meant. With the correction implicitly a criticism is uttered—both ideas impinging at the same moment—the criticism of the notion, now understood as a false notion, of the person as a self-defined "a-social" individual. No, it is not about three Gods; that would be to understand God in terms of the modern understanding of persons. Ernstpeter Maurer talks of a feeling of "dizziness" with which one can

29. It is a matter of ongoing discussion as to whether the "person" concept of the so-called social Trinity is really so unambiguously to be traced back to the trinitarian thought of the Cappadocians as the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, among others, has suggested. See, for example, Turcescu, "Person versus Individual," 527–39; on Zizioulas' interpretation of the Cappadocians see, *Being as Communion*, 27–65, and 83–89; Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 86–103; and Papanikolaou, "Is John Zizioulas an Existentialist in Disguise?" 601–7.

be seized when confronted with trinitarian concept—and that is about right.[30] I would call it a feeling of dizziness of a contemplative thought movement.[31] In the early church and the Eastern Church of today, the theology of the Trinity still has a much stronger spiritual function. There we can also seek to experience in this movement of thought a sense of being drawn into the presence of the God witnessed to in the Bible. This is understood no less as an experience of knowing God.[32]

So knowledge and contemplation appear not as contradictory categories. There is no clash of the rational and the irrational or of the "comprehensible" and the "incomprehensible." It is more about a familiarity that emerges from participation in the actions of the one known. In a similar way we "know" a good friend by taking part in his or her life. Desiring relationship is, in this understanding, an essential component in the work of human relationships. I understand it as a form of the work of relationships when, in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, mystical practice is nurtured. Through this way of knowing, it seems to me, believers receive the invitation of God to work on relationships, and so exercise a way of thinking that cultivates participation in the life of God.[33] It might well be that this is not always clearly heard in Protestant talk of coming to know God by the gift of faith: the inten-

30. Maurer, "Trinitätslehre," 14.

31. See for example the "spiritual" method of reading by Aquinas by Kerr, "Tradition and Reason," 37–49. In his spiritual method of reading Thomas Aquinas the British Dominican Fergus Kerr interprets the introductory questions of *Summa Theologiae*, De Deo, as a way of training in thinking metaphysically, by which superstitious implications should be excluded. "If *this* highly abstract treatise on God is not just a set of metaphysical theorems that turns the living God of the Bible into the abstract 'God of the Philosophers,' as so many people suppose, then we might begin to see our way towards re-reading these questions as a spiritual exercise, a discipline that searches out the temptations to idolatrous conceptions of God which retain their grip even when we are deeply immersed in scripture" (45). We can think here of the scholastic doctrine of *intellectus* in Dietrich of Freiburg, which can in any case be described in terms of a contemplative movement of thought, leading to knowledge but not to resolution. See also Flasch, *Einführung in die Philosophie des Mittelalters*, 171–80.

32. Coakley, "Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa," 441; in relation to Jewish thought, see Wohlmuth, "Trinitarische Aspekte des Gebetes," 83–101; Lesniewski, "Erkenntnis in der Gottesbegegnung," 42–54.

33. In this sense I understand the reception of the mystical tradition by Jürgen Moltmann as the completion of his endeavors on this theme. See his "Theologie der mystischen Erfahrung," 127–45; with regard to participatory knowledge, see ibid., 129f.

tion to emphasize the difference between God and the human person seems just too great. But when we think about it a little further, we have to admit: here also is the primary intention to think about faith on the basis of a habitual assurance, as a gift. And this is no different from a Spirit-motivated abiding in the covenant of God; in other words, in a participatory state of knowing.[34] Also, in a Protestant view, faith lives from the possibility of coming to the certainty of the nearness of God. In non-Protestant traditions, a sensibility for the nearness of God can emerge from the contemplative movement of thought that draws a person into the presence of God.

This means that the idea of the immanent Trinity has emerged within the Christian tradition only because one can sense the contemplative effect of this knowledge of God in terms of participating in this immanent Trinity. On this I find myself in agreement with the interpretation of Sarah Coakley and others. If one understands the doctrine of the Trinity in this way, its practical relevance also becomes clear. In spite of all talk of "immanence" and the priority given to it—and we see this many times in the history of theology—ordinary believers and highly sophisticated theologians alike have found in the vision of the trinitarian life of God a model for their own individual human and communal, ecclesial lives. It is not only Orthodox Christians who celebrate a vision of participation in God and a social ethic in the eucharistic community.[35] The language gain of trinitarian theology thus becomes less important for showing the reasons or the root of the doctrine of God, as in Karl Barth, but rather for ascertaining the contemplative culmination of the vision of the presence of God.

Summary: Consequences for Inter-religious Dialogue

So where do we stand? If it were not for reflection on the biblical testimony to a differentiated acting of God in relationship, then trinitarian God-talk would be unnecessary. From here, from the economic level, believers create a new language about the being of God. Obviously this takes the form of an immanent Trinity, which speaks of the triune being of God in a way that reflects the economic Trinity. If we think in terms of the superficial dissimilarity between the subject and its abstract reflec-

34. For background, see Link-Wieczorek, "Glaube," 117–19.

35. Zizioulas, "Die Eucharistie in der neuzeitlichen orthodoxen Theologie," 163–79.

tion in art, we could ask whether a structurally similar triune concept of the immanent Trinity were absolutely necessary. But without question this structure opens up creative possibilities for talking about God: it can create a tension in images between unity and diversity, individual personality and triunity, which assures believers through contemplation of the vitality of God and the promise of God's coming. To this degree it makes sense to designate, as the basic framework of the doctrine of the Trinity, this tension between unity and threeness, as a rule of language, as the content of speech about the immanent Trinity, and as an ever new and creative speech gain. The new speech seeks to lead to an established contemplation of belief in God's vitality. As such it draws us into liturgy and doxology. Indeed, the basis for this, and its content, had to emerge from the level of the economy. Here the main direction is established: the belief in the identity of the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ who, in the self-giving of his nameless name, invites us to call him by the names from out of the history of his works.

Let me now briefly draw out three consequences for inter-religious dialogue. The demand that the doctrine of the Trinity places upon Christian-Muslim dialogue is that Christian faith insists that the living God in Jesus Christ is none other than the Jewish God of Israel. Any Christian-Muslim monotheism is only to be recognized as a function of Jewish-Christian-Muslim monotheism.

The doctrine of the Trinity is relevant to inter-religious dialogue not as a form of speech about the being of God, but as a rule that marks out the boundaries of Christian God-talk. It marks out the constellation of connections in which concepts, metaphors, and ideas, be they similar or different, develop their significance. This significance is not to be defined once and for all, but to be discovered in the contexts of everyday life. One such context could be inter-religious dialogue. Christian participants do not arrive at the dialogue with ready-made concepts, but at most with rules to combine and interpret, in which the economic doctrine of the Trinity defines the boundaries of faith in the opening of God's covenant with Israel to the Gentiles.

Speech of the immanent Trinity as talk about Godself will cause misunderstanding if it, and not the economy, is taken to be the framework for discussion. This is the essence of the following theses with regard to the Muslim misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Muslim criticism of the trinitarian speech of God, as found in the Qur'an, is mostly nourished by three specific misunderstandings, which are also to be found quite frequently even within Christianity. The three misunderstandings are as follows:

- The misunderstanding of the metaphoric trinitarian concept of "persons," which then again has its basis in
- An implicitly monophysite christological tendency to talk about the person of the Son, as well as
- A reversal of the order of perception, of the economic and immanent Trinity

All three misunderstandings have their roots in the misconception that the linguistic form of the immanent Trinity is taken as a template for the economic Trinity, so that its contemplative character is misunderstood. We are not to say that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity—that is going to create a linguistic and conceptual mix-up in which we cannot but be misunderstood.

But we could carefully and invitingly talk about the vitality of God, and about God's movements of mission and gathering, in which God draws us human beings into his history of relationship. This is the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity and with it the simple Christian motive for inter-religious dialogue. For if there were no mission of God, there would be no reason for dialogue with others: they would mean nothing to us. In a participatory knowledge of God this, however, is not possible. A contemplative trinitarian vision places us with all, in our creatureliness, into the perspective of God and lets us look at the world and others through the eyes of God. It stands therefore very much at the end of the speech about God and not at the beginning. The form of triunity becomes itself provisional. Looked at in that light it also seems correct to say that we could talk differently about God: rather than as Trinity, we could talk about God as mystery, as unchangeableness or as infinity—as long as the economic frame of reference is not put aside. If we could succeed in explaining the contemplative character of the three-persons language, including to people outside of the Christian tradition, we could have gained a great deal for inter-religious dialogue. In my opinion it can only succeed if the process of contemplation be integrated into the common search

for the adequate talk of God in inter-religious dialogue—but only if the participants enter into this conversation not as those who claim to know, but as inquiring seekers. That is why I am not so optimistic if the participants in inter-religious dialogue claim to know exactly from the very start where the inter-religious differences lie.

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