

For the Love of God

Toward a Defense of a Doctrine of the Ontological Trinity and Its Function in Christian theology

Jeffrey J. Meyers

November 1999

One would be hard pressed to find a modern theological book or journal article on trinitarian theology that does not at least mention, but probably begins with Rahner's now famous dictum: "the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."¹ This theological axiom, however, may be more opaque than is commonly thought. A benign reading will yield the enormously productive insight that all we know of the immanent or ontological Trinity must arise from our exposition of the works of the three Persons of the Godhead in the economy of creation and redemption as they are revealed in Scripture and that we dare not move beyond what God's activity in the economy warrants in our trinitarian theologizing.² In so far as the dictum has fueled a renewed interest in investigating the biblical economy, it has served modern trinitarian theologians well in their critical reception of

¹ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York and London: Herder and Herder, Inc, 1970), p. 22. See also "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate,'" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. Kevin Smith (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1976), p. 87, and "The Mystery of the Trinity," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16 (1976), pp. 255-259.

² This is, in fact, one of Rahner's major concerns: "In the Trinity in the economy and history of salvation and revelation we have already experienced the immanent Trinity as it is in itself. But the fact that God reveals himself for us in the modes we indicated as trinitarian, we have already experienced the immanent Trinity of the holy mystery as it is in itself, because its free and supernatural manifestation to us in grace *manifests* its innermost self. For the absolute identity of the Trinity with itself does not signify a lifeless and empty homogeneity. Rather, this identity includes in itself as the nature of divine life the very thing which encounters us in the trinitarian nature of his coming to us" (Karl Rahner, *Foundations of*

the church's past speculation on the "immanent" Trinity.³ Unfortunately, Rahner's principle allows for a much more dangerous reading: that the trinitarian being of God is exhaustively *identified with* (not only *by*) the historical economy of salvation, however narrowly or broadly this economy may be conceived. All such readings jeopardize the ontological independence of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who freely acts upon and in created history. Walter Kasper warns:

Today, of course, the opposite misinterpretation [of Rahner's axiom] is more likely: the identification is taken to mean that the immanent Trinity is dissolved in the economic Trinity, as though the eternal Trinity first came into existence in and through history. In eternity the distinctions between the three Persons would then at best be modal, and would become real only in history. Finally the axiom is being completely misunderstood when it is turned into a pretext for pushing the immanent Trinity more or less out of the picture and limiting oneself more or less to consideration of the Trinity in the economy of salvation.⁴

Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity, trans. William V. Dych [New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982], p. 137, emphasis mine).

³ Walter K. Kasper explains that "the original purpose of the axiom. . . was to overcome the non-functionality of the doctrine of the Trinity and to link the doctrine once again with the history of salvation, thus making it intelligible once again to the believer. In this perspective the axiom is correct, legitimate and even necessary" (*The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell [New York: Crossroad, 1996], p.275). Eberhard Jüngel says that Rahner's principle provides a legitimate new foundation for trinitarian theology "als sie eine ausdrückliche Konstituierung des trinitarischen Gottesbegriffs durch eine Theologie des Gekreuzigten möglich macht and damit dem exegetischen Problemfeld gerechter wird, as das der klassischen Trinitätslehre möglich war" (Eberhard Jüngel, "Das Verhältnis von 'ökonomischer' und 'immanenter' Trinität," in *Entsprechungen, Gott-Wahrheit-Mensch.* [Munich: Ch. Kaiser, 1980], p. 267). Jüngel, however, also warns against dissolving the immanent into the economic Trinity (p. 275).

⁴ Kasper, p. 276. He cites Piet Schoonenberg and Hans Küng as representatives of this dangerous trend. For similar warnings against the possibility of Rahner's axiom leading to an absolute identification of God's economic presence and works with his eternal being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or to an agnosticism concerning the reality of God *in se*, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), pp. 508-509; G. F. O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 37-40; David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas: The Doctrine of the Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 14-65; Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 3, *The River of Life Flows in the East and in the West*, trans. David Smith (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), pp. 13-14; J. A. Di Noia, "Karl Rahner," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, second edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 126-131; Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), pp. 292-299; John J. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (London: Sheed & Ward Ltd., 1989), p. 36-39;

Despite his “of course,” Kasper’s warning goes unheeded in many modern trinitarian theologies. David Coffey also describes this bias in modern theological studies.

Where earlier writing concentrated on the immanent Trinity to the neglect of the economic Trinity, the present trend is in the opposite direction. While the emphasis on the economic Trinity is a positive gain (in that it broadens trinitarian theology to make it include almost the whole of systematic theology, and links it firmly to salvation, thereby demonstrating its relevance), some of the more recent writing shows a lack of balance in that it evinces a dismissive or reductive attitude toward the immanent Trinity, which, after all, was a major concern of the Church Fathers and the early councils. This attitude reveals itself in a tendency either to dissolve the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity altogether or to be agnostic about the existence of the immanent Trinity.⁵

In this essay I will begin to question the wisdom of this contemporary theological fashion. And in so doing I will just barely touch upon the highlights of a defense of what I would prefer to call a doctrine of the “ontological Trinity”—that God exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, ontologically distinct from and independent of, but not relationally isolated from his creation. However one slices the ontological pie of created being, all of creation including humanity must always remain dependent upon the freedom of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’s gracious will both for its existence as well as for its redemptive restoration in Christ. Contrary to some influential modern economy-bound trinitarian theologies, God’s tri-

Eberhard Jüngel, “Das Verhältnis”; William J. Hill, *The Three-Personed God: The Trinity as a Mystery of Salvation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), p. 258; Anne Hunt, *The Trinity and the Pascal Mystery* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), pp. 128-131; Paul D. Molnar, “The Function of the Immanent Trinity in the Theology of Karl Barth: Implications for Today,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42.3 (1989): 369-70; idem, “Toward a Contemporary Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity,” *SJT* 49 (1996): 311-357; idem, “God’s Self-Communication in Christ: A Comparison of Thomas F. Torrance and Karl Rahner,” *SJT* 50 (1997): 288-321; idem, “Robert W. Jenson’s *Systematic Theology, Volume I: The Triune God*,” *SJT* 52 (1999): 117-131; John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 27-30; Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 2, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 176-181; Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 274-80; Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), pp. 77-102; and idem, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1980), pp.146-178.

⁵ David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas*, p. 4.

personal being is not *constituted* or *mutually conditioned* by created human or world history, not the history of Israel or even the history of Jesus and his Church. The Triune God should not be identified *as* but *by* his work in history. The “is” in Rahner’s axiom “must be understood as meaning not an identification but rather a non-deducible, free, gracious, historical presence of the immanent Trinity in the economic Trinity.”⁶

Of course, I recognize that many modern trinitarian theologians are not always consistent in their rejection of an ontological Trinity. But some are. Theologians like Schoonenberg,⁷ Haight,⁸ LaCugna,⁹ Lampe,¹⁰ Mackey,¹¹ Peters,¹² Kaufman,¹³ P. Hodgson,¹⁴ Wiles,¹⁵ and

⁶ Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 276.

⁷ Piet Schoonenberg, *The Christ*, trans. by D. Couling (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971); idem, “Continuïteit en herinterpretatie in de Drieëheidsleer,” *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 14 (1974): 54-72; idem, “Trinität—der vollendete Bund: Thesen zur Lehre vom dreipersönlichen Gott,” in *Orientierung* (1973), trans. “Trinity—The Consummated Covenant: Theses on the Doctrine of the Trinitarian God,” *Studies in Religion* 5 (1975-1976): 111-6.

⁸ Roger Haight, “The Point of Trinitarian Theology,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 4/2 (1988): 191-204.

⁹ Catherine M. LaCugna, *God for Us : The Trinity & Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1973); idem, “Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity,” *Modern Theology* 2 (1986): 169-181; idem, “Re-Conceiving the Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985): 1-23; idem with K. McDonnell, “Returning from ‘The Far Country’: Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988): 191-215.

¹⁰ G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹¹ James P. Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 196-201.

¹² Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

¹³ Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribners, 1968); idem, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

¹⁴ Peter C. Hodgson, *God in History: Shapes of Freedom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

¹⁵ Maurice Wiles, “Some Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Journal of Theological Study* 8 (1957): 92-106; idem, “In Defense of Arius,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962): 339-47; idem, *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1979); *The Making of Christian Doctrine: A Study in the Principles of Early Christian Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Richardson¹⁶ are quite categorical in their repudiation of any doctrine of an imminent or ontological Trinity. Other theologians will at times write as though God does indeed exist as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *in se*, but then a few pages later may make his tri-personal existence dependent upon or correlative with some aspect of human history. Though not explicitly repudiating the ontological/economic distinction, these authors nevertheless construct subtle trinitarian theological systems that in effect encourage agnosticism not only about the supposed details of the inner life of the ontological Trinity but also concerning the very existence of such an ontologically independent triune Godhead. Theologians like Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jüngel, Jenson, and even Rahner himself at times may fit this latter tendency. While they often draw so much of their persuasive power from their liberal use of traditional and biblical theological language, one wonders how far they have succumbed to the modern ontological and epistemological *Zeitgeist*.¹⁷

Even if collapsing the ontological Trinity into the economic history of God's works characterizes one conspicuous *trend* in modern trinitarian studies, every one of these prominent modern theologians who writes on the Trinity seems to fall out at various places on a spectrum between outright denial and diffident advocacy of the Trinity's ontological independence. The reader must keep in mind that in order to defend the ontological aseity of the Triune God, I will

¹⁶ Cyril C. Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958); idem, "Trinity and Enhypostasia," *Canadian Journal of Theology* (1959): 73-78; and idem, "The Doctrine of the Trinity," *Religion in Life* 29 (1959): 7-15.

¹⁷ Henri Blocher doesn't wonder at all. "For all of their artful and learned presentation, whether in the 'user-friendly' version of Moltmann or the more sophisticated one of Jüngel, or through the tensions and twists of Pannenberg, would any of these post-Hegelian constructions of the Trinity lead readers to believe in the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, apart from the memory of church dogma? . . . In spite of Jüngel's homage to the Fathers, to the Reformers, in spite of Pannenberg's *Gründlichkeit* on issues of historical theology, they differ deeply in their foundation, elaboration, and import" ("Immanence and Transcendence in Trinitarian Theology," in *The Trinity in A Pluralistic Age*:

often draw out of an author what I believe are dangerous implications of statements that others may treat as merely incautious formulations. If Augustine’s warning about the subtlety of trinitarian theology was needed at the headwaters of the church’s doctrinal exploration of this topic in the fifth century, how much more must it be very carefully heeded today: “For nowhere is a mistake more dangerous.”¹⁸

Questions for Rahner

Perhaps the first question ought to be put to Rahner himself. Does he intend to eliminate the need for a theology of the immanent or ontological Trinity? Although Rahner himself sometimes seems to push his own axiom in this radical direction—for example, when he uses such categorical formulations as “the immanent Trinity is *strictly* identical with the economic Trinity and *vice versa*”¹⁹—he nevertheless does end up with his own form of an immanent or ontological Trinity, one which not surprisingly has been described as neo-Thomistic.²⁰ Disciples of Rahner who want to wield the *vice versa* in his axiom like a metaphysical meat cleaver and lop off every trace of an ontological Trinity and thereby correct Rahner’s own supposed theological inconsistency criticize their mentor for not going far enough.²¹ Nevertheless, for whatever reason—and it may be Rahner’s own deference to his Roman Catholic theological

Theological Essays on Culture and Religion, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997], p. 116).

¹⁸ *De Trin.* 1.1.5 (*The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, vol. I/5 [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991], p.68).

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, “Theology and Anthropology,” *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 9 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 32, emphasis mine.

²⁰ Rahner, *The Trinity*, pp. 80-120; see also Werner Löser, “Trinitätstheologie Heute: Anätze und Entwürfe,” in *Trinität: Aktuelle Perspektiven der Theologie*, ed. Wilhelm Breunig (Freiburg: Herder, 1984), p. 22; Di Noia, “Karl Rahner,” pp. 118-133; and Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, pp. 93-102.

²¹ “Finally, according to Rahner at least, distinctions in the economy originate in and are grounded in distinctions ‘in’ God. It is on this last point that we part ways with Rahner” (LaCugna, *God*

heritage—because he himself is happily inconsistent he is able to maintain the ontologically independent existence of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is one way to read Rahner. Another less favorable reading might indict Rahner himself for failing adequately to articulate immanent *personal* relations within the Godhead. Because of this failure he perpetuates the tendency in post-Augustinian theology to de-personalize the eternal fullness of God’s inner life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is perhaps ironic that when Rahner describes God’s relationship with creation and humanity in particular he uses personal language—self-communication, love, etc. Nevertheless, his discussion of the intra-divine reality lacks these personal categories and so seems oddly modalistic (“three distinct manners of subsisting”²²)—a creative variation of the Augustinian and Thomistic trinitarian tradition and an ever so slight alteration of Barth’s *seinsweise*.²³

Rahner’s systemic failure here might even have been the occasion for those who have used him to further their own radical economic trinitarianisms. Indeed, it might be argued that Rahner’s own theological perspective on the question of the “persons” and “relations” within the Trinity actually tends to open up a divide between the immanent and economic Trinity. As Gerald Bray observes, “It seems that Rahner is prepared to insist on the existence of a personal relationship between God and humanity, but not within the Godhead. This. . . suggests that God requires a being outside of himself in order to manifest his love, and that therefore he is not perfect in himself.”²⁴ Here we encounter a, maybe *the* problem that haunts all radical economic

For Us, p.221); see also LaCugna and McDonnel, “Returning from ‘the Far Country,’” pp. 204-5; and James P. Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 196-201.

²² Rahner, *The Trinity*, p. 110.

²³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pt. 2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), pp. 348-368 (Hereafter: *CD*).

²⁴ *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 187.

trinitarian theologies—the specter of a *mutually* conditioning ontological and/or personal relationship between God and his creation.

If this analysis is correct, it means that how one configures the immanent relations within the ontological Trinity will indeed affect how one conceives of the relation between God and his creation. To put it crudely, if God does not possess the fullness of life and personal fellowship *in se*, then he will in some sense *need* creation in order to realize that which he lacks. If correct, this analysis would also help explain the rise of radical economic trinitarianism as an “answer” to the anemic, metaphysically obtuse theology of the immanent relations of God that characterized much of post-Reformation scholastic theology (and to some extent, in spite of his stated methodology, Rahner’s own very traditional immanent Trinity).

Therefore, without a theology of immanent *personal* relations Rahner’s description of God as “self-communicating” becomes problematic. Could it be that without a doctrine of God’s immanent tri-personal relations, the foundational significance of Rahner’s principle of “self-communication” has created as many problems as it was meant to solve both in his own theology and in those who have used it in constructing even more radical economy-bound trinitarian theologies?²⁵ What function can the concept of self-communication have within the confines of a single divine “self” or “person” such as Rahner posits? On such a construction God cannot be self-communicating apart from some relation to a personal being outside of himself.²⁶ If such is the case, then when one speaks of overflowing (Jüngel), self-giving (LaCugna), or self-communication (Rahner, etc.) as that which defines the very nature of God, some proper

²⁵ See Paul D. Molnar, “God’s Self-Communication in Christ: A Comparison of Thomas F. Torrance and Karl Rahner,” *SJT* 50 (1997): 288-321. Colin Gunton identifies the ambiguity of this notion of self-communication as one of the fundamental problems in modern trinitarian theology (Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, second ed., p. xix).

distinctions and qualifications must be made if one is going to avoid strapping the divine being with a Hegelian necessity vis-a-vis creation. If it is God's *nature* to give himself (or to communicate himself, etc.), and if such a statement is made about the divine being (as the "self") over against the creation as the receiving "other," then the creation becomes necessary for the *natural* "overflow" of God's being. Without creation, specifically humanity, God would have no "other" towards which to exercise his love. The economy of creation and redemption would have to be the result of God's self-fulfillment rather than that which results from a willful communication from the fullness of his own tri-personal communion.

The way to avoid this would be to link the notion of self-communication and self-giving with the Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thereby grounding this relational give and take in the ontological Trinity. God's communion is thus ontologically primordial. Within the triune personal life of God each Person freely, though distinctly, lives in self-giving relations with the others. E. L. Mascall explains:

. . . all that distinguishes the Father and Son from each other is that the Father possesses Godhead paternally and the Son filially, and that this involves eternal and complete self-giving by the Father and eternal and complete self-response by the Son. It must be emphasized that it is precisely because the self-giving of the Father is complete that it is the begetting of a co-equal Son and not the creation of an inferior creature; and it carries the implication that the glory of the Godhead consists not in an eternal self-possession but in an eternal self-giving.²⁷

This fullness of life and love *a se* needs no non-divine other, so that to speak of the one God's nature in relation to creation as self-communicating might be misleading unless one immediately qualified such language with an assertion of the free and gracious origin of God's

²⁶ For similar criticisms see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991], pp. 307-8 [Hereafter *ST*]).

²⁷ E. L. Maschal, *The Triune God: An Ecumenical Study* (Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1986), p. 18. It might be helpful to modify Maschal's description to include the Son's self-giving to the Father and the Father's response of the Son's gift of love.

self-giving creation of human persons within his own tri-personal self-giving and – receiving being.²⁸ The giving and receiving within God’s tri-personal being needs no other.

Each of the three give and each of the three receive, each in their own distinctive way.²⁹

Unfortunately, some radical economic Trinitarian theologies are in danger of transforming St. John’s theological maxim “Of his fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace” (John 1:16) into “of his need to communicate himself we have all received that which has been necessary for him to constitute himself as a self-giving personal being.”

Questioning the Augustinian Tradition: Which Immanent Trinity?

In defending the ontological Trinity and the divine subjective independence and Lordship of the three Persons over creation must we necessarily embrace one particular traditional theological explication of the “immanent Trinity”? I recognize, of course, the need to articulate a meaningful explanation of God’s inter-Trinitarian personal relations, and that to some extent the acceptance of the doctrine of the ontological Trinity depends upon such an explanation. I also recognize the need for critical appraisal of both the Eastern and Western received traditions concerning the immanent Trinitarian relations. But do they really deserve to be read, as they so often are in modern radical economic trinitarian theology, in the worst possible way? Not every

²⁸ “The inner-divine self-relationship [*selbstverhältnis*] appears as love in God’s own self-relatedness [*Selbstbezogenheit*] which includes a yet greater self-giveness [*Selbstlosigkeit*]. But now it is this yet greater self-giving in himself that enables God himself in freedom to step outside of himself: God, who is love, creates for himself, from nothing, his own other, so that the love revealed in Jesus Christ and experienced through the Spirit is already the inner ground of the creation of man” (Jüngel, “Das Verhältnis,” p. 270). In the next sentence Jüngel goes on to identify Barth’s contribution in this area. According to Barth, the inner life and relatedness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—what Barth, following much of Reformed tradition, describes as an inter-divine “covenant”—constitutes the inner ground of Creation (see especially *CD* 3/1, pp. 42ff.).

²⁹ The “mutual defining of the distinctiveness of the Persons” is Pannenberg’s monumental insight into the immanent trinitarian relations (Pannenberg, *ST*, pp. 278-80, 308-319).

notion of God's ontological aseity arises from the imposition of alien metaphysical principles upon Christian theology.

LaCugna, for example, consistently casts any doctrine of an imminent Trinity in the worst possible light. In doing so she uses unnecessarily prejudicial language to describe the historic Church's theological formulation of a Creator/creature ontological distinction. She describes the medieval theological synthesis as "the divine persons were thought of as existing 'in' God, in a realm *cut off* from the economy of salvation history by virtue of an *unbreachable* ontological difference."³⁰ She may indeed make a valid point about the trajectory of the doctrine of the Trinity in medieval scholastic theology, but the language she uses prejudices the case against a legitimate theological understanding of the ontological difference between the Creator and creature. LaCugna describes the traditional doctrine of an "immanent Trinity" as "the reciprocal relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to each other, *considered apart from* God's activities in the world."³¹ Once again, this clause at the end is unnecessarily pejorative and misleading. Actually, what classical Nicene trinitarian theology attempted was a formulation of the being of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *considered in the light of* God's activity in the world, particularly in the activity of Jesus.

Theological affirmations about the ontological Trinity need not lead to a Trinity that is "locked up within itself, having only an appropriated relationship to us."³² The God who is ontologically other than his creation need not be "cut off" from it, and the ontological difference certainly need not be "unbreachable." In fact, trinitarian theology is all about how the true and living God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has breached not only the ontological gap but also

³⁰ LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 210, emphasis mine.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 211, emphasis mine.

the relational separation due to man’s sin in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son! But because of her ambiguity about the Trinity’s ontological otherness it is precisely this “from above” Christology which is compromised by LaCugna when she explains the relationship between the Father and the Son. The Trinity exists in ontological freedom as Lord of creation such that any relationship God has with us is grounded in the freedom of his love and grace—a freedom and love which he antecedently enjoys as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in all eternity, but which he has graciously chosen to exercise toward us in Christ.

Many modern trinitarian theologians like LaCugna are perhaps too ready to identify every doctrine of an immanent Trinity with certain unhealthy speculative developments that *may* have been set in motion by Augustine’s conjectural analysis in his *De Trinitate*. I emphasize “may” because it remains to be genuinely established whether Augustine truly is the cause of everything wrong with “classical” trinitarian theology. There are competent scholars who defend Augustine against such sweeping characterizations as are found in many contemporary “histories” of the development of Western trinitarian theology. Michel Rene’ Barnes, for example, argues that most anti-Augustinian, modern historical reconstructions are too often driven by theological categories that are imposed upon the ancient and medieval church. Citing LaCugna’s grand narrative of the demise of economic trinitarianism as an example, Barnes notes that even the oft-used paradigmatic polar categories of “immanent” and “economic” Trinity are largely the creation of late-19th-century scholarship.³³

One also might stop and consider whether a good deal of the theological angst over Augustine’s psychological analogies has more to do with modern Western readings of his work

³² Ibid., p. 216.

³³ Michel Rene’ Barnes, “Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 238.

which assume that Augustine's illustrative triads refer only to isolated individual (i.e., *self-conscious*) minds.³⁴ Augustine clearly does not understand the "image of God" in a modern individualistic sense. Curiously, most systematic presentations of his trinitarian theology take no notice of his exegetical and polemic works, concentrating solely on his *De Trinitate*. Pursuing a broader spectrum of Augustine's works, one discovers that he did indeed understand that the individual alone could not adequately image the fullness of God's inner life. Individuals *per se* are not created in the image of God, but mankind, human beings, "male and female" (Gen. 1:27) image God.³⁵ The image of God is ineradicable social. After all, it is more than a little ironic that Augustine himself is chiefly responsible for the shift in antique culture from private, mystical asceticism towards an understanding of the indelible communal nature of human life, especially Christian ecclesial living. Robert Markus calls attention to Augustine's communal monastic rules as well as the vision of the *City of God* in order to argue that Augustine transformed Greco-Roman culture by steering it away from its concentration on the isolated self. Augustine held that "the most insidious form of pride, the root of all sin, was 'privacy,' self-enclosure."³⁶ Similarly, Cochrane argues that it was Augustine's "discovery" of trinitarian

³⁴ Michael Hanby, "Desire: Augustine Beyond Western Subjectivity," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 109-126

³⁵ One wonders if Augustine has become the theological-whipping boy simply because modern authors can only with great difficulty fashion readings of him that would support their own radical social or political agendas; see Charles Sherrard MacKenzie, *The Trinity and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1987); David S. Cunningham, "What's [Not] New in Trinitarian Theology," *Reviews in Religion and Theology* (1997): 14-20; idem, "Trinitarian Theology since 1990" *Reviews in Religion and Theology* (1995): 8-16; and idem, David S. Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

³⁶ Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 73-83

personhood that revolutionized life in the ancient world.³⁷ Clearly, more thought needs to be given to the overly simplistic characterization of post-Augustinian developments in trinitarian theology.³⁸

There are, then, respectable trinitarian scholars today who defend an Augustinian or modified Augustinian-Thomistic theology of an immanent Trinity.³⁹ On the other end of the

³⁷ Charles Norris Cochrane, “*Nostra Philosophia: The Discovery of Personality*,” chapter XI in *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 399-455.

³⁸ Other articles that critique the modern blame-Augustine-for-it-all bandwagon include Lewis Ayers, “The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. by Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 51-76; idem, “Augustine, the Trinity and Modernity,” *Augustinian Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 127-33; idem, “The Discipline of Self-Knowledge in Augustine’s *De trinitate* Bk X,” in Lewis Ayers, ed., *The Passionate Intellect: Essays Presented to Prof. I. G. Kidd* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995), pp. 261-296; Michael René Barnes, “Rereading Augustine’s Theology of the Trinity,” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. by Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 145-176; idem, “The Fourth Century As Trinitarian Canon,” in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, ed. by Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 47-67; David S. Cunningham, *These Three are One*, pp. 30-35; Michael Hanby, “Desire: Augustine Beyond Western Subjectivity”; John Milbank, “The Force of Identity,” in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 194-216; idem, *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), pp. 422ff.; and Rowan Williams, “*Sapientia* and the Trinity: Reflections on *De Trinitate*,” in *Collectanea Augustiniana*, vol. 1, ed. B. Bruning (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 317-22; and idem, “The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge in the *De trinitate*,” in *Collectanea Augustiniana*, J. T. Lienhard, et al., eds., *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum* (New York & Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 121-134.

³⁹ In addition to the works listed in the previous note, see Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*; W. Norris Clarke, “Person, Being, and St. Thomas,” *Communio* 19 (1992): 601-618; Coffey, *Deus Trinitas*; Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*; Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*; Ewert Cousins, “A Theology of Interpersonal Relations,” *Thought* 45 (1970): 56-82; Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1982); Wayne J. Hankey, “Theoria versus Poesis: Neoplatonism and Trinitarian Difference in Aquinas, John Milbank, Jean-Luc Marion, and John Zizioulas,” *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 387-415; Edmund Hill, “Introduction,” in *The Trinity*; Thomas Marsh, *The Triune God: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Blackrock, Dublin: Columbia Press, 1994); W. Hill, *The Three-Personed God*; Charles Sherrard MacKenzie, *The Trinity and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1987); Anthony Kelley, *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989); Nicholas Lasch, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles’ Creed* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1993); and idem, “Considering the Trinity,” *Modern Theology* 2 (1986): 183-195; Bernard Lonergan, *De Deo Trino* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1964); idem, *Divinarum Personarum conceptionem analogicam* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1957); John Milbank, “Intensities,” *Modern Theology* 15

spectrum⁴⁰ are those who argue for a more “social” understanding of the immanent relations within the Godhead.⁴¹ Then, too, many in the Eastern Orthodox tradition remain loyal to the Cappadocian understanding of God’s Triune being.⁴² All of these theologians maintain a doctrine of an immanent or ontological Trinity. My own sympathies lie with those modern

(1999): 445-497; Michael O’Carroll, *Trinitas: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Holy Trinity* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987); Rahner, *The Trinity*; idem, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*; Peter Toon, *Our Triune God: A Biblical Potrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996); M. J. Sheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. C. Vollert (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Co., 1946); and Rowan Williams, “De Trinitate,” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 845-851.

⁴⁰ It is difficult to know exactly what typology to employ when characterizing the various contemporary trinitarian theologies. Where, for example, do we put Barth and some of his disciples? With the neo-Augustinians because they stress the oneness of God? I am, of course, not even including what I consider unorthodox “process” or liberal “symbolic” trinitarian theologies within this spectrum (see, for example, Joseph A Bracken and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, eds., *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God* [New York: Continuum, 1997]; idem, *The Triune Symbol: Persons, Process, and Community* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985]; and idem, “The Holy Trinity as a Community of Divine Persons,” *Heythrop Journal* 15 [1974]: 166-182).

⁴¹ Among the more important works defending some version of a “social” Trinity are: Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1985); idem, “Trinitarian Personhood and Individuality,” in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986); William Hasker, “Tri-Unity,” *Journal of Religion* 50 (1970): 1-32; Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1944); idem, *How Can God Be Both One and Three* (London: S.P.C.K., 1960); Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “The Hodgson-Welch Debate and the Social Analogy of the Trinity” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1982); idem, “Gregory of Nyssa and the Social Analogy of the Trinity,” *The Thomist* 50 (1986): 325-352; idem, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*; idem, “The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 37-53; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991); Jaun Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974).

⁴² Boris Bobrinskoy, *The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition*, trans. Anthony P Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1985); idem, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution,” in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 44-60; idem, “Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975): 401-448; and Kallistos Ware, “Human Persons as an Icon of the Trinity,” *Sobernost* 8 (1986): 6-23.

Reformed theologians who utilize many of the insights of the “social” trinitarians and acknowledge the necessity of critiquing the more or less modalistic, even subordinationistic tendencies in both the Western and Eastern traditions, but without abandoning the genuine theological insights of classical trinitarian doctrine.⁴³ Some recent Reformed theologians, building on the creative work of Cornelius Van Til, offer especially provocative and potentially productive theological reformulations of the meaning and use of the doctrine of the Trinity⁴⁴

Even though I prefer to highlight the Creator/creature distinction by using the term “ontological Trinity,” I believe that the adjective “immanent” may yet be serviceable for trinitarian theology as long as some of classical Augustinian and Thomistic speculation on the

⁴³ Herman Bavink, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951); Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, second ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997); idem, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity. The 1992 Bampton Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); idem, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); Christoph Schwöbel, ed., *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Scwöbel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995); idem and Colin Gunton, eds., *Persons, Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Tomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); idem, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988); James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & The Triune God of Grace*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996; Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); idem, “The Self-Relation, Narcissism and the Gospel of Grace,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 481-510; *The Forgotten Trinity: The Report of the B.C.C. Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today* (London: British Council of Churches, Inter-Church House, 1989); Donald Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity* (Ann Arbor: Vine Books, 1985); idem, *God the Almighty* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995);

⁴⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969); idem, *Defense of the Faith* (2nd. Ed., Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963); idem, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1978); John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1995); idem, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1987); idem, *Van Til: The Theologian* (Chattanooga, TN: Pilgrim Pub. Co., 1976); Vern S. Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 187-219; idem, “The Supremacy of God in Interpretation,” Tms (Photocopy); Ralph Smith, “Cornelius Van Til on the Trinity,” Tms (photocopy, 1999); Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978); idem, *The Foundations of Social*

inner being of God is jettisoned in favor of more carefully articulated Bible-normed formulations. Such a Scripture-normed trinitarian theology of the inner life of God would not only avoid most of the impersonal, metaphysical, even causal abstractions of classical theology, but would embrace a more dynamic, personal conception of the being of God, one in which God's ontological otherness is constituted as the personal being-in-communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Such a doctrine, one which faithfully witnesses to the Triune God's inexhaustible relational fecundity *a se*, should be able to ground God's *opera ad extra* in the willful overflow of his love and thereby safeguard the freedom God and the utterly gracious nature of both man's creation and redemption in Christ. With this doctrine of the ontological Trinity, we confess that the biblical economy of God's work in creation and redemption discloses not a timeless, static, monadic being to which are added relational or modal distinctions, but the eternal fullness of God who is constituted as God by the rich dynamism of three freely related Persons.

What about the Creator/creature distinction?

Our next inquiry concerns the status of the Creator/creature distinction in these newer economic trinitarian theologies. Do these theologians adequately articulate the covenant lordship of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit over creation? In order to answer such a question comprehensively each individual author has to be analyzed and critiqued. After doing so, we discover a spectrum of positions on this issue. With some authors (LaCugna, Peters, and Schoonenberg, for example) one wonders about the very existence of a Creator/creature demarcation, let alone where to draw it. For other theologians like Pannenberg, Jüngel,

Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978); and

Moltmann, and Jenson, if the ontological distinction between Creator and creature is not denied it is perhaps sufficiently blurry as to raise questions about the nature of God's relation with creation. Whether it is Pannenberg's sophisticated ontological retroactivity,⁴⁵ Moltmann's utopian vision of God as realized in eschatological humanity,⁴⁶ or Jenson's subtle recasting of classical trinitarian ontology to include a man (Jesus) as one of the Three,⁴⁷ one cannot help but note a common aversion among modern trinitarian authors for what perhaps is thought to be the metaphysically dualistic and oppressive doctrine of the Creator/creature distinction. There may be some justification for the fear of the Creator/creature distinction when God is conceived of in exclusively unipersonal terms. The origin of modern atheism has been attributed in part to the

idem, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1994), pp. 171-224.

⁴⁵ At least this is one interpretation of Pannenberg (see Blocher, "Immanence," p. 115; William J. Hill, "The Historicity of God," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): p. 323; Roger Olson, "Trinity and Eschatology: The Historical Being of God in Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983): 223-24; and idem, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990). While Olsen credits Pannenberg with a weak adherence to some form of an immanent Trinity ("Wolfhart," p. 196), nevertheless, these studies appeared before the publication of Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*. As I indicated earlier, passages in Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* point in another direction. "In the action of finite subjects the subjects precede the goal and its achievement in time, and the goal corresponds to a need. Neither the one nor the other of these conditions can be transferred to God. In his eternity God is present at all times and the goal of his action, the manifestation of his lordship over the world of creation, does not make good a lack in his eternal being but incorporates his creatures into the eternal fellowship of the Son with the Father through the Spirit" (Pannenberg, *ST* 1, p. 389). Pannenberg also rejects the applicability of the notion of "self-development" to the Trinity: "This idea is not appropriate, however, because each person realizes itself in its relations to the other two. . . . as opposed to the pantheistic interpretation of the Idealistic notion of the self-development of the Absolute in the cosmic process, which would have it that God himself achieves fulfillment only through the process. The trinitarian God is complete in himself prior to his relation to the world, and this is the presupposition of the idea that he is his own cause" (*ST* 1, p. 391). Of course, it may be that the pressure of his eschatological ontology essentially neutralizes these otherwise orthodox utterances.

⁴⁶ See Roger Olson, "Trinity and Eschatology," p. 221 and Randall E. Otto, *The God of Hope: The Trinitarian Vision of Jürgen Moltmann* (Lanham, MY: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 227-233.

⁴⁷ ". . . the Trinity is simply the Father and the man Jesus and their Spirit as the Spirit of the believing community" (Robert Jenson, *God According to the Gospel: The Triune Identity* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982], pp. 141); see also his *Systematic Theology Volume I: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 141, 221, and "Jesus in the Trinity," *Pro Ecclesia* 8 (1999): 308-318.

waxing cultural dominance, from the 17th century onward, of an overweening monotheistic ontology together with its stifling effect in human communities.⁴⁸ Even so, a healthy trinitarian doctrine of God grounded in an orthodox Christology should be sufficient to guard against all tyrannical theological configurations. God's eternal being is not only constituted as the loving relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but his *opera ad extra* are just the gracious "overflow" of his fellowship and love to include created humanity. The Triune God did not create to dominate and control, but to share or communicate the fullness of his own life with mankind, and through Christ to bring mankind into fellowship with the Triune family, so to speak.⁴⁹

Without an ontologically independent Trinity, one cannot properly conceive of God's relation to creation. The differentiated Triunity of God makes possible both an ontological and personal transcendence as well as an immanent presence through his Son and Spirit.⁵⁰ In this

⁴⁸ See Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); W. Waite Willis Jr., *Theism, Atheism, and the Doctrine of the Trinity: The Trinitarian Theologies of Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann in Response to Protest Atheism*. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987).

⁴⁹ Jonathan Edwards speaks just this way: "There was, [as] it were, an eternal society or family in the Godhead, in the Trinity of Persons. It seems to be God's design to admit the church into the divine family as his son's wife" (*Miscellanies*, 1004; cited by Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], p. 19).

⁵⁰ Pannenberg argues that "the infinity of God has to be conceived in terms of being transcendent as well as immanent in the reality of the world—transcendent in terms of existing in the person of the transcendent Father and Creator of the world, but immanent and present within it through his Son and Spirit" ("The Christian Vision of God," p. 35). Colin Gunton uses Irenaeus' terminology of the "two hands" of God to describe the Father's immanent relations with creation through his Son and Spirit (*The Triune God of Creation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmann, 1998], p. 166-171). We must also affirm without qualification that the ontological freedom of God as Lord not only does not imply the absence of the creature's freedom, but in fact guarantees the very freedom he enjoys as creature. God and the creature do not occupy points on some sliding scale of being such that affirming something of God necessarily means taking the same away from the creature. This is surely one of Cornelius Van Til's most productive and useful theological insights. It cuts the ground out from underneath every modern criticism of God's absolute sovereignty and lordship. At some point they can all be shown to have adopted some form, however subtly, of the old pagan scale of being ontology.

way God is covenant Lord over his creation. We say that God is Lord “in this way” in order to avoid all non-biblical concepts of lordship. A similar temptation arises with concepts like transcendence and immanence, indeed with every ascription we make about God. If we are not careful to invest these common terms with biblical content, they are likely to tyrannize our doctrine of God and compel it to conform to whatever cultural, political, or philosophical meaning these terms possess in our modern world. This, of course, does not constrain the theologian to use only biblical terms, since even biblical terms can become subject to unbiblical, alien connotations depending upon how they are used by any particular culture. Rather, we must carefully determine what the Bible says about God, and in this case about God as Lord, in order to faithfully communicate his proper relations with creation.

Precisely at this point, with the doctrine of God’s lordship over creation, do we clash swords with much of modern trinitarian theology. Especially when we discover that modern trinitarian theologians are careful to distance themselves from all conceptions of God’s lordship over creation that might imply distasteful associations with political or cultural domination and authoritarian control—in other words, with every way of articulating God’s relation to creation that seems to justify and empower those who would depersonalize others in order to accomplish their own personal or political goals. Unfortunately, these theological programs often end up denying every conception of authority and thereby degenerate into a radical egalitarianism that is simply the secular dipolar opposite of the error that is being opposed.⁵¹

The Word of God, however, supplies every thing we need here. If theologians would but pay careful attention to the richness of the ways in which God has revealed himself in the Bible, especially the diverse ways in which God in his freedom interacts with and makes himself

⁵¹ This must be a major criticism raised against Moltmann’s project

immanent in the world as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they would not have to shipwreck 1
their theology either on the Scylla of “monotheistic” tyranny or on the Charybdis of “tritheistic”
egalitarianism. It is precisely the trinitarian lordship of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that
richly transcends all such human dichotomies, as Pannenberg explains:

The three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit are primarily the subject of the divine action. By their cooperation the action takes form as that of the one God. This must be the starting point of a Christian answer to the totalitarian implications of a single divine subject acting without restriction.⁵²

Given the mystery of the Trinity, there simply is no one created analogy, no one relation between two different modes of created being that we can analyze and catalog for the purpose of providing us with a sufficient explanation of the fullness of the Triune Creator’s ways of relating to his creation, especially to those whom he has created for fellowship with himself. As Barth explains, the absoluteness of God need not be feared.

Now the absoluteness of God strictly understood in this [trinitarian] sense means that God has the freedom to be present with that which is not God, to communicate Himself and unite Himself with the other and the other with Himself, in a way which utterly surpasses all that can be effected in regard to reciprocal presence, communion and fellowship between other beings. It is just the absoluteness of God properly understood which can signify not only His freedom to transcend all that is other than Himself, but also His freedom to be immanent within it, and at such a depth of immanence as simply does not exist in the fellowship between other beings. No created being can be inwardly present to another, entering and remaining in communion with him in the depths of its inner life. No such being can create and sustain the life of another, seriously leading and governing, binding itself to the other and the other to itself in eternal faithfulness and whole-hearted devotion. The essence of every other being is to be finite, and therefore to have frontiers against the personality of others and to have to guard these frontiers jealously. It lies in the nature of the created being to have to be true to itself in such a way that with the best will in the world it simply cannot be true to another. It is its very nature that it cannot affirm itself except by affirming itself against others. For this reason it is only by simplification and tentatively, i.e., not with basic seriousness, that created beings can be present with each other, communicating and binding themselves to each other, listening to each other. Therefore between all such beings, as there is no genuine transcendence so there is no genuine immanence. A pantheistic or panentheistic alternation between God and another is required to affirm a true immanence even

⁵² Pannenberg, *ST* 1, p. 388.

between created beings, instead of between God alone and all created beings. This affirmation needs a good deal of poetic fancy. But God is free. He is also free to be immanent, free to achieve a uniquely inward and genuine immanence of His being in and with the being which is distinct from Himself.⁵³ 2

Even, or especially when God is acting as Emmanuel in his Son and Spirit he cannot be dissolved into his work and activity but remains the free Lord of all. Even as God has united himself intimately and without recall to our humanity in Jesus Christ, and even though that union in some sense conditions the being of God as the one who now and forever possesses our nature as our Savior and Redeemer, yet nevertheless there is no metaphysical necessity that demands that union since he has freely willed that union into all eternity. There is no *mutual* conditioning, only the conditioning that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has chosen for himself as the one who freely loves his Bride, the Church.⁵⁴

We return to LaCugna as an exemplary representative of way these radical economic trinitarian theologies lead to a smudging together of God and creation. LaCugna is only able to safeguard God's being from being swallowed up in history in so far as she draws the line between Creator and creature so as to place everything and everyone that is not the Father below the line. How then does LaCugna understand God's paternity? To whom is he a Father? According to the Apostles' Creed and the historic Christian faith, He is first the eternal Father of the Son. The eternal Son assumes human nature and enters history to redeem his people. But if you look carefully at all of LaCugna's references to the Fatherhood of God, you will discover

⁵³ Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 313.

⁵⁴ This *freely chosen* "conditioning" or "correlativity" vis-à-vis creation is entirely different than an ontologically or relationally *necessary* conditioning and may in fact be what Pannenberg means when he says that the Father, Son, and Spirit "by the creation of the world and the sending of the Son and Spirit to work in it. . . has made himself dependent upon the course of history" (*ST* 1, p. 329). Moltmann also sometimes talks like this, especially when he carefully defines the passibility of God as the "suffering of passionate love," as that which is freely chosen by him and not as a condition forced upon him by

that for her God as Father is the Creator. The Father's fatherhood is defined in relationship to creation and humanity and not to any specific relation that may be internal to the Godhead, such as the Father to his eternal Son. This is very suspicious, especially given her many provocative statements in support of Arius and in opposition to the Athanasian and post-Nicene *homoousian* Christology.⁵⁵ Consider her summary introduction to the post-Nicene theological development of the Trinity:

This new phase within theological reflection licensed a certain incongruity between God's work of redemption and deification, and God's being as such. The Word sent from the Father was situated no longer on the side of creation that was made and redeemed *through* him and ultimately will be consummated in him, but in the domain of transcendent diving being. The same thing happened with the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶

What is she saying here? I submit that the meaning emerges clearly as she reaches her conclusions: Jesus addresses God as Father because he is part of the created world—he is the first created being to be redeemed and deified, the firstfruits of all creation. Now, there is some truth in part of this. The human response of Jesus can indeed be fruitfully explored as the obedient response to the Father *pro nobis*.⁵⁷ But with LaCugna's denial of any sort of immanent

necessity of nature or outside causes (Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], p. 23).

⁵⁵ LaCugna's preference for pre-Nicene trinitarian formulations is problematic. She believes that they simply recapitulate what the Bible says about God's *oikonomia*. Would that it were so. Unfortunately, the pre-Nicene theology is diverse and contains a great deal of suspect formulations which LaCugna conveniently ignores. I think the traditional explanation suffices: before Nicea the church was content with a relatively unselfconscious and paradoxical confession of God, which later, in response to the oddness of various explanations by those who would later become "heretics," was refined by further reflection on the Bible and their liturgy. Besides, I don't believe that a careful reading of Irenaeus, for example, will find him in support of LaCugna's own idiosyncratic denial of God's ontological independence of the created world (LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 26-27; see Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.20.1; *IV Prol.* 4; 5.6.1 and 28.4).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵⁷ See especially Alan J. Torrance's explanation of trinitarian doxological participation in *Persons in Communion*, pp. 307-371; and similar insights in James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 43-67; *idem*, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ," in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*,

trinitarian relations, she cannot hold to any orthodox variation of Chalcedonian Christology that would ground the man Jesus' relationship with the Father in a pre-incarnate state of the Son.⁵⁸ What is this but a new and subtle form of Arianism? Apparently, LaCugna has no appreciation for the essential *evangelical* significance of the *homoousion*.⁵⁹

Perhaps LaCugna's basic theological error arises from her abandonment of the Creator/creature distinction with respect to the Trinity and creation, specifically her refusal to place the Son and Spirit on the Creator side of the ontological dividing line. Historical Christian theology agrees with her that there is no other God behind the God who is revealed in the economy of Jesus saving work. But she must also come to grips with the economy of *creation*, specifically what we learn there about the triune God's freedom and ontological independence from all that he has created. Sure, there is no ontological disjunction between what God is in himself and what God is for us. Nevertheless, if there is to be a God-for-us, then there must be a God. In other words, there must be "a" Trinity if there is to be a Trinity-for-us. Otherwise, we are left with a purely immanent god, a god of the world process, or possibly, a mysterious,

AD 381, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1981); and Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

⁵⁸ "The idea of the preexistence of the Son of the eternal Father is crucial . . . Without the preexistent Son who became incarnate in Jesus there would be no trinitarian concept of God" (Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Christian Vision of God: The New Discussion of Trinitarian Doctrine," *Asbury Theological Journal* 46 [1991]: 30). Christoph Schwöbel argues that much of the current "crisis" in modern Christology is due to its inadequate grounding in trinitarian doctrine ("Christology and Trinitarian Thought," in *Trinitarian Theology Today*, pp. 113-146).

⁵⁹ LaCugna's pro-Arian sympathies are barely disguised and a neo-Arian Christology permeates her work (*God For Us*, pp. 35, 53-54, 73, 101-02, 110, 115-16, 119, 124-25, 127, 129, 134, etc.). Barth warns that "if we will not listen to the fact that Christ is antecedently God in Himself in order that in this way and on this basis He may be our God, then we turn the latter, His being God for us, into a necessary attribute of God. God's being is then essentially limited and conditioned as a being revealed, i.e., as a relation of God to man. Man is thus thought of as indispensable to God. But this destroys God's freedom in the act of revelation and reconciliation, i.e., it destroys the gracious character of this act." He goes on to contend that such a denial of God the Son's inter-trinitarian ontological existence leads to the idea that "it is God's nature to have to forgive us" or to unfold himself in this self-communicative way. "That, and not the Church dogma which forbids this thought is untheological speculation." (*CD I/1*, p. 421).

wholly other Father God who unfolds “Godself” into Christ and the Spirit, and who then, in good Neoplatonic fashion, in union with humanity, re-folds it all back into the numinous “one” God.⁶⁰

Since in LaCugna’s system there is no intradivine relations of love within the eternal being of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is then willfully extended to include humanity in Christ, she is left with a single numinous subject (the Father), who because of his “self-communicating” nature must find an other to communicate with. It appears that LaCugna cannot avoid the charge that being-in-relation is not ontologically ultimate after all, since one Unnoriginate “self” stands as the monarchical origin of the entire *oikonomia*. Everything and everyone flows from and back into this one monadic God. Because she rejects a doctrine of the ontological Trinity her theology finds has no place for the primordial trinitarian ontological communion which graciously opens up to create and include humanity into this fellowship.⁶¹

⁶⁰ “There is neither an economic nor an immanent Trinity; there is only the *oikonomia* that is the concrete realization of the mystery of *theologia* in time, space, history, and personality” (LaCugna, *God For Us*, p. 223). “The starting point in the economy of redemption, in contrast to the intradivine starting point, locates *perichoresis* not in God’s inner life but in the mystery of the one communion of all persons, divine as well as human. From this standpoint ‘the divine dance’ is indeed an apt image of persons in communion: not for an intradivine communion but for divine live as creatures partake and literally exist in it” (ibid., p. 274). In such an ontological soup the transcendence, and therefore the free grace of God is seriously jeopardized.

⁶¹ If, according to LaCugna’s economizing trinitarianism, absolutizing God necessarily leads to a divine timeless tyrant and to problems with properly conceiving human freedom vis-à-vis such a “monotheistic” deity, how does immanentizing God help? Identifying God with historical events is equally problematic, not the least for any project that hopes to ground human freedom theologically. Smudging the world, especially humanity and God’s being into one ontological mash will not yield a biblically grounded conception of human freedom. Colin Gunton argues that the only a doctrine of the ontological Trinity can secure man’s proper created freedom: “But, it may be asked, what is the point of such speculation about the inner being of God? The answer is that the distinction between economic and immanent Trinity achieves more than a concept of God’s freedom. It is, as we have seen, a matter of human freedom as well. The personal otherness, the self-sufficiency, of God is the basis on which freedom depends because it is the ground for the otherness of the human in relation to God. That freedom derives from the gift in both creation and redemption of the God who has and is personal space and so can be the creator of such space. If God is not and has not personal space ‘in advance’, in eternity, the danger remains that human freedom will be overwhelmed by a sovereignty of immanence. Our freedom is based

Even though LaCugna has helpfully outlined the problems that surface in theology when we *separate* the immanent and the economic Trinity, in the end, because she rejects the Creator/creature distinction, she collapses Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into the economic plan of salvation. I would argue that if there is a “plan,” then there must be a Trinitarian counsel that implements the plan—a “mind” independent of the plan.⁶² To say it with a Barthian spin: with LaCugna’s formulation we have lost the ontological wholly otherness of God. For her, it is not that the Trinity is present and acts *in* the *oikonomia*, but that the Trinity *is* the *oikonomic* process itself. The *oikonomia* is no longer the realm in which the Trinity of Persons as they exist in all of their otherness, act, and relate to us as distinct divine subjects, but only the realm in which the trinity of divine and human persons actually *exist*. All of this is ultimately modalistic at best, and maybe even atheistic.

The term “Trinity” for LaCugna merely expresses the trinitarian pattern or mode of God’s self-revelation as manifested through Christ and in the Spirit by which human persons (including Jesus) are related to God. If God doesn’t exist outside of the economy, but *is* the economy, how can she avoid reducing this “Godself” to a principle of differentiation or a process that gives rise to human relations and somehow unveils the numinous “more” contained within

in, derives from, God’s sovereignty. But unless it is at least in part a sovereignty of transcendence, of personal space, it threatens to overwhelm us” (Gunton, *Promise*, pp. 134-135).

⁶² Ralph A. Smith offers a compelling theological-exegetical argument from the Gospel of John for the ontological Trinitarian counsel of redemption in “Trinity in Covenant,” in James B. Jordan, ed., *Christendom Essays* (Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1997), pp. 70-85. Reformed scholastic theology has called the inter-Trinitarian counsel that is behind God’s economic work the *pactum salutis*, that is “covenant of redemption” or even “the counsel of peace” (see Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978], pp. 375ff.; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatic* [Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966], pp. 285-336; Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Casper Olevianus* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996], p. 109; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1939], pp. 262-271; and Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 [reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979], pp. 359-62).

them? How is this then different than Hegel or Tillich or Process theology. She gives up the farm, in my opinion, when, in classic Arian fashion, she reduces all language about God to metaphorical groping (p. 354, 359). Trinitarian language, on this view, merely expresses with religious images an impersonal philosophical principle of relationality which governs and underlies all of reality. The Son and Spirit become only impersonal expressions of the high mystery god’s relatedness which becomes personified in human society.

The monumental theological failure of LaCugna’s project illustrates the hidden dangers in many radical economic trinitarian theologies. Her reduction of the ontologically distinct Trinity of Persons to the realm of the economic is nothing but the “incarnation” of the Trinity as a whole into the historical process or vice versa.⁶³ LaCugna’s understanding of salvation as deification, in the end, becomes a kind of realized—and humanly realizable—ontology of

⁶³ What exactly is the economic Trinity in a theological system like LaCugna’s? Where is it to be found? According to Rahner, LaCugna’s mentor, it should not be exhaustively identified with the history and work of Jesus Christ. Self-communication is a more comprehensive reality that cannot be confined to Christology. God’s self-communication embraces the history of all humanity. Where ever humans seek self-transcendence there you have the concrete reality of the self-communication of God himself. As Badcock summarizes, “The history of human self-transcendence is the history of the self-communication of God to humanity” (Gary Badcock, “Karl Rahner, the Trinity, and Religious Pluralism,” in Vanhoozer, *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, p. 144). The Christ-event may stand at the apex of that history, but does so only as the definitive disclosure or revelation of the mystery of all human existence. Even though modern economic trinitarian theologians like LaCugna eschew Scheiermacher’s individualistic starting point, they nonetheless begin, like him, with human consciousness, albeit as a social construct. God’s relational becoming vis-à-vis human personal existence becomes the key. Thielicke argues that one of the reasons for the resurgence of neo-economic trinitarianisms lies in the post-Enlightenment (and we might say now at the end of the 20th century, in the post-modern) axiomatic commitment to the Kantian critique of metaphysics (*The Evangelical Faith*, p. 150). Today any doctrine of the immanent Trinity, with its insistence on God’s independent ontological life *a se*, comes under the condemnation heaped on all dogmatic metaphysics—namely, that they make assertions about that which we can only be agnostic. All of this comes home to roost in LaCugna and Gordon Kaufman, where the Trinity degenerates into a symbol reflecting the threefold structure of Christian experience which we cannot say is internal to God because we have no access to any such God. God and Christ are symbols that we construct in order to create a better society; they help us relativize, humanize, and liberate society. Entering into the divine life resolves itself into entering into a life of love and communion in human society. God, then, becomes only a conceptual construct of our experiences in the economy rather than God himself acting in the economy as one who enables our human freedom.

communion.⁶⁴ With precisely this Pelagian danger in mind, Jüngel warns against dissolving the ontological into the economic since without an ontological Trinity there can be no mystery of God's free grace, only the mystery of cosmic existence itself.

The unity of "immanent" and 'economic' Trinity may be maintained as theologically legitimate only if this unity is not misunderstood tautologically in the sense that the freedom and unmerited grace of the self-communication of God becomes unthinkable. Therefore, if we wish to maintain the real identity of 'immanent' and 'economic' Trinity as *mystery*, then the distinction between 'economic' and 'immanent' must be retained in trinitarian theology.⁶⁵

Conclusion

A thorough defense of the doctrine of the ontological independence of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and such a doctrine's usefulness in relation to the important issues raised by modern trinitarian theologians remains to be written. I have only scratched the surface in this short essay by asking and briefly answering a few relevant questions, using the work of Rahner and LaCugna as my foil. Such a defense would need to examine the historical development of the classical doctrine of God's immanent relations with great care. A viable explanation of the

⁶⁴ Confessing the ontological independence of the Trinity will help guard against a decidedly Pelagian tendency in many contemporary forms of economic trinitarianism. As Gary Badcock notes, "it is possible for a trinitarian theology to be primarily a theology of the spiritual life rather than of the divine life--to be concerned basically, in short, with our approach to God rather than with God's approach to us." (Badcock, "Rahner," p. 144). LaCugna ultimately espouses what might be called a "Pelagian" conception of human participation in the Trinity. Just as the man Jesus was divinized, so too we enter into God's life by divinization rather than God himself through Christ enabling us to live a life of love and communion with others (see Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, p. 315ff.). The only way LaCugna can find God in Christ is insofar as he humanly embodies "divinization." She says, because Christ lived, died, and was raised to life "His person, as the achievement of truly divinized human nature is in this sense eternal" (*God For Us*, p. 296). This kind of Pelagian trinitarianism owes more to modern, experience-derived theologies of human potential than to the orthodox, Augustinian and Reformation theological tradition that begins with sovereign grace.

⁶⁵"Die Einheit von 'immanenter' and 'ökonomischer' Trinität zu behaupten ist theologisch nur dann legitim, wenn diese Einheit nicht in dem Sinne *tautologisch* verkannt wird, daß die *Freiheit* und ungeschuldete *Gnade* der Selbstmitteilung Gottes und also deren *Ereignishaftigkeit* undenkbar wird. Es sollte deshalb, gerade um die *reale* Identität von 'immanenter' und 'ökonomischer' Trinität als *Geheimnis*

immanent personal relations within the ontological Trinity would have to be presented, one grounded in a carefully defined methodology that moves from the *oikonomia* to *theologia* without inappropriate speculation.⁶⁶ It would also work towards reconfiguring various theological dilemmas, such as the relationship between the Triune God and creation, salvation, revelation, the Old Testament, Christology, soteriology, and eschatology. Virtually every traditional *loci* of systematic theology ought to be impacted by the theologian's stance on this issue. Even this assertion would have to be established and the affects of denying or affirming the ontological independence of the Triune God fleshed out. Moreover, the practical implications of such a doctrine for Christian living, worshiping, and the kerygmatic proclamation of the Gospel needs to be explored as well. In short, there remains a earnest need for orthodox Christian theologians to defend the doctrine of God's ontological independence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and thereby explain its necessary function in Christian dogmatics.

We need a doctrine of the ontological Trinity so that we can avoid smudging time into eternity, history into God's being, and the consequent subjugation of God to any law of historical

aussagen zu können, die *distinctio* rationis von 'ökonomischer' und 'immanenter' Trinität theologisch beibehalten werden" (Jüngel, "Das Verhältnis," p.275).

⁶⁶ This is a very important element in such a project. When reading authors like Lacugna one nagging question won't seem to go away: does the specter of Feuerbach haunt these recent trinitarianisms? They all tend to collapse the mystery of theology into anthropology, specifically the mystery of communal societal life. Is the Trinity much more than an theological encoded representation of human intersubjectivity and love? Are these economic trinitarianisms in danger of succumbing to the epistemological tyranny of human consciousness and experience as constitutive for the doctrine of the Trinity. Should not faith seek understanding from the Word of God and the work of God revealed in the Word of God first and only afterwards use experience and analogies from human experience as auxiliary means of clarifying and deepening our understanding of what we learn from God's self-attesting verbal revelation? Questions like this become credible when we remember that Rahner's axiom was originally formulated to reconcile the conclusions of natural theology with the Christian doctrine of the trinitarian nature of God (See Rahner, "The Concept," in *Theological Investigations* 4, p. 72; idem, *Hearers of the Word* [1969], p. 49; and see also Anne Carr, "Theology and Experience in the Thought of Karl Rahner," *Journal of Religion* 53 [1973]: 359-76; Paul D. Molnar, "Can we know God directly? Rahner's Solution from Experience," *Theological Studies* 46 [1985]: 228-261).

development, whether in its older Hegelian form or in its newer “relational” cast. Molnar is correct: “God is fully who he is without needing to submit to a metaphysical principle of relationality or temporality ad intra or ad extra.”⁶⁷ Cornelius Van Til has argued that today modernism seeks entry in the church by means of the old non-Christian understanding of God as limited by his creation. Christian theology must not “yield an inch on this point,” insists Van Til, because the Bible nowhere portrays the Triune God as limited deity.⁶⁸ But we also need to confess the ontological Trinity in order to be faithful to the biblical history of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’s saving work. A limited, dependent deity could not deliver us from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Therefore, a hearty doctrine of the ontological Trinity safeguards two inexorably conjoined fundamental theological maxims: *Deus non est in genere* and *salus solum Domino!*

⁶⁷ Molnar, “Toward,” p. 334-5.

⁶⁸ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p.200.