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Only a fully trinitarian theology will do, but where can that be found?

ABSTRACT

The argument of this contribution, departing from a famous article by Arnold van Ruler, is that a fully Trinitarian theology requires attention to God's work and not only God's identity and character. The three relationships between Father and Son, Son and Spirit and Father and Spirit are briefly explored in order to demonstrate how difficult it is to do justice to both God's work of creation and of salvation, to both the freedom of the Spirit and the discernment of the Spirit, and to both a diversity of spiritualities and the identity of the Spirit as the one commissioned by the Father of Jesus Christ. This yields the conclusion that a fully trinitarian theology remains elusive despite the trinitarian renaissance over the last few decades.

INTRODUCTION

In a famous essay on "The necessity of a trinitarian theology" Arnold van Ruler (1989:1) observes that "Simply recognizing the necessity of a trinitarian theology does not mean that one succeeds in the project." He adds that he has not found such a theology in the entire Christian theological tradition, suggests that Calvin approached that ideal most closely, and admits that he is not able to offer anything approximating that. This comment may sound odd given the renaissance of trinitarian theology in the last century and the astonishing flourishing of books on the doctrine of the trinity over the last three decades. Yet, a "fully trinitarian" theology remains more elusive than a mere affirmation of its significance may suggest. Why is this the case?

The key does not necessarily lie in revisiting classic trinitarian distinctions or in delving into a form of inner-trinitarian mysticism based on the "social analogy". The trinity does govern the very core of the Christian confession and forms its doxological conclusion – rather than a logical point of departure for an entire theological system. Yet such a doxological conclusion is undermined by questions that emerge regarding the relationship between the work of the Father, Son and Spirit. Whatever position one may take on the relationship between the economic and immanent trinity, it should be clear that a fully trinitarian theology cannot be presented only on the basis of inner-trinitarian relationships without clarity on the work of the Father, Son and Spirit in relation to each other. As I will argue below, I still do not see such clarity emerging. A fully trinitarian theology may therefore be as elusive as before the renaissance of trinitarian theology over the last three decades.

The first and the second articles: Doing justice to creation and salvation

Both creation and salvation are the work of the triune God. One can speak about these themes only in a trinitarian way. However, merely offering three perspectives rather than one is not sufficient. If the relationship is understood in a way that undermines either the one or the

other, that reveals an inadequate understanding of the trinity. Various issues where justice has to be done to both creation and salvation therefore offer test cases for a “fully trinitarian theology. It is far more difficult to do justice to both creation and salvation than it may appear at first sight. Typically the one is subsumed under the other or under a third category.

The most acute formulation of the issue at stake is perhaps by Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2000:75): “Is the God of our redemption the same God of our creation?” This question is born from the African quest for identity. What is the continuity between a pre-Christian African notion of the creator God and the Christian message of redemption that took root in Africa following the work of Western missionaries? Since the earliest Bible translators have used the same word and name for the God of our ancestors and for the God of Christian proclamation, there appears to be some continuity, but given the legacy of colonialism certainly also deep tensions in this regard.

On this basis one may argue that the relationship between creation and salvation underlies much of contemporary African theology, especially theologies based on notions of indigenisation and inculturation, even though this is seldom articulated as such. This is closely related to discourse on “the gospel and our culture”. Whenever there is a too close identification of Christianity with a particular culture (Niebuhr’s “the Christ of culture”), this prompts a prophetic critique of culture. Such a critique is entirely appropriate as Christian discourse on consumerism illustrates (see Conradie 2009). However, in contexts of cultural, ethnic and linguistic marginalisation and oppression there is a need to affirm not only human dignity but also the authenticity of cultural expressions. There comes a time when black theologians need to insist that “Black is beautiful”. Indeed, theological reflection on “black liberation” requires justice to both creation and salvation. Of course, such an affirmation of culture may well be dangerous – as the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in response to British imperialism and cultural marginalisation illustrates.

One may argue that the relationship between creation and salvation was the underlying issue at stake in South African debates on apartheid theology. Apartheid theology was essentially a theology of creation based on the “orders of creation”. It maintained that differences of race and ethnicity was part of the created order and had to be maintained, if necessary through law and order. Salvation was thus understood as separation, keeping racial groups apart, for the sake of all concerned. In response, most notably in the Belhar confession, it was maintained that the theological legitimisation of apartheid undermined the message and ministry of reconciliation in Jesus Christ and assumed the irreconcilability of people – different races are so different that the best option is to keep them apart. The struggle against apartheid theology therefore rightly focused on soteriology and ecclesiology, but in reformed circles hardly addressed issues in creation theology. Elsewhere apartheid was described as an anthropological heresy (Maimela 1983) on the basis of a critique of racism, a liberal notion of the inherent goodness of humanity, African cultural notions of *ubuntu* and Desmond Tutu’s notion of being members of the family, the rainbow people of God (2005). It is at least clear that any evading of the doctrine of creation will necessarily undermine the plausibility of the message of salvation. If the relationship between God and the world is not addressed, it is scarcely possible to explain how God can save the world.

There are several other burning issues on the agenda of churches and theological reflection, in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, where clarity on the relationship between salvation and creation as *creatura* is also required.

- How is the Christian faith related to scientific theories, for example quantum cosmology and biological evolution? Some would tend to offer either a theological legitimization or a theological repudiation of such theories. Others would suggest that “faith has nothing to do with science”. The two categories operate at different levels and should not be confused. What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens? The church with the academy? Is that an adequate theological response though?
- How should medical evidence around the reversibility (or not) of a homosexual orientation be employed in theological reflection? Often such evidence seems to be decisive in forming a theological position. Is that appropriate in terms of a theological methodology? However, an approach where such evidence is not taken into account at all would be equally problematic.
- Many have observed that the stigmatisation of HIV/AIDS forms part of the problem. Accordingly, AIDS cannot be regarded as God’s punishment for human sin, more specifically for sexual promiscuity. In response, many have treated the spread of the HIV-virus merely in medical, sociological and psychological terms? Those infected or affected by the virus are regarded as victims, even as purely “innocent” victims. They are treated as patients who suffer from the disease. However, given the associated issues around faithfulness to one’s partner, one can scarcely argue that the spread of the disease has nothing to do with human sin. How, then, is the Christian message of sin and salvation related to the medical issues. Moreover, why are there such viruses in God’s good creation?
- What is the place of the church amidst other groups in civil society? How should its uniqueness as an “eschatological community” be understood? Is the church just another non-governmental organisation? Is the church a voluntary association, a club or a civil organisation? What is the relationship between church law and civil law? How should the church (at different levels) engage with the state, political parties and policy making?
- How should the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions be understood? Can Christianity be regarded as one particular form of religion alongside others? Would any such generic term not undermine the claims to universality of Christian faith? Does God have indeed many names? Alternatively, how should the continuity between Christianity and Judaism and between Judaism and earlier religious traditions be understood? What do the gods of Egypt and the God of the Bible have in common? Where do our notions of God and of transcendence come from in the first place? How is that related to the common human sense of wonder?
- In terms of everyday life Christians have to explain to themselves how being Christian is related to being human. How is Sunday related to the rest of the week? What is the relationship between Christian faith and the world of work, culture, science and art? What difference does being a Christian make in coping with the demands of life, with the production and consumption of food, with human sexuality, with health and sickness, with capability and disability, with generation and degeneration? What about death? Is death natural? Is that part of God’s good creation too?
- In ecclesial praxis the basic questions of a theological hermeneutics cannot be avoided. What is the relationship between human words and God’s Word? How can our human words and images be used to express something about God’s identity and character?

What is the difference between Christian and secular ethics? What role should social analysis play in a contextual hermeneutics? What “point of contact” may be found for education, pastoral care, apologetics and mission? How can the dominant vocabularies of a particular culture be used to express the gospel without distorting it by translating the gospel into something that it is not, for example by “selling” it as a “product” on the market of religious ideas?

In each of these cases it is not self-evident why and how the world as we know it (or don't know it) can be described as God's own creation (*creatura*). The problem is that the world as we know it is always already perceived to be the product of God's work of creation, of the legacy of human sin and of God's work of providence and salvation. This requires considerable discernment. To return to the example of homosexuality: Is being gay part of God's good creation? Or the result of fallenness? Is being gay good, but being straight better? Does one have to be “saved”, or healed, or even exorcised from being gay? Or will one remain gay also in the eschatological consummation since God declared that to be good too? Or does sexual orientation no longer matter? Is sexuality abolished in the eschaton? Do we then have to be saved from our sexuality? These questions cannot be answered on the basis of soteriology or creation theology alone.

Questions around creation and salvation are perhaps expressed most acutely whenever the theodicy problem is raised. This is indeed the experiential heart of discourse on creation and salvation. Inversely, the theodicy problem can only be addressed on the basis of an adequate understanding of the relationship between creation (God as the omnipotent Creator) and salvation (God as the loving Saviour). Indeed, without reflection on the relationship between creation (*creatio*) and salvation and on the question what creation (*creatura*) is to be saved from, discourse on the theodicy problem would all too easily take a theological short-cut by failing to address the origins of evil (especially sin) and the consequences of sin (evil).

The examples above illustrate the social and pastoral significance of discourse on creation and salvation, the work of the Father and the work of the Son. They do not as yet indicate the underlying theological difficulties. As I have explored this in far more depth elsewhere (Conradie 2013:1-50), I will only hint at these problems here through a series of questions in bullet form:

- How is God-talk possible in the first place? What enables us to describe the world as we know it as God's own beloved creation? Some may argue that this is only possible on the basis of experiences of or witnesses to God's salvation, but that claim poses similar problems: How can experiences of healing, reconciliation, justice or peace be ascribed to God's work? What theory of divine action is assumed in this regard?
- Many would argue that salvation should be understood as the salvation *of* God's creation (*creatura*) and not as salvation *from* creation. But what does that actually mean on an evolving planet in an expanding universe? It can all too easily be reduced to the salvation of human beings or human culture (or the lifestyles of the consumer class) from the impact of anthropogenic ecological destruction. Moreover, is the planet to be saved only from human sin or also from what is called “natural suffering”? If the former, can death still be regarded as the result of human sin only? If the latter, how can a notion of salvation as elevation from that which is natural, material, bodily and earthly be avoided? Sharply formulated: Is the work of Christ to improve on the inadequate work of the Father?

- If creation is understood as *creatio* the question shifts to the relationship between God's acts of creation (in the beginning?) and God's acts of salvation. One may then portray God's acts of creation as salvific, establishing order amidst chaos (Gen 1), while God's acts of salvation may be portrayed as creative. However, a different set of problems emerge in order to prevent either a compartmentalising or a fusion of these categories. A compartmentalising of these two categories typically lead to a form of neo-Calvinist apartheid theology where salvation can only be understood as the restoration of the order assumed to be established through God's work of creation. Creation becomes normative for salvation. The dangers of fusion are equally pervasive if less well understood. If the act of creation is itself salvific, what is it that salvation is from? Inversely, if salvation is understood as creative, where does such creativity come from? What theory of divine action is involved and how is that shaped by an understanding of God as Creator?
- A somewhat different set of issues emerge when the focus shifts from God's work of creation, salvation and consummation to reflection on God's identity. Here the question is how the relationship between the Christian confession of faith in God as Creator and as Saviour (the first and the second articles of the Christian creed) may be understood. One may argue that it is impossible to do justice to both creation (the work of God the Father/Mother) and salvation (the work of Jesus Christ) without the work of the Holy Spirit (re-creation, comfort, sanctification). However, to avoid distortions in understanding the relationships between the work of three persons in the trinity is far easier said than done.

The underlying problem may also be clarified when the different ways of constructing the plot of God's work of creation, salvation and consummation are considered. I see only the following four possibilities and all of them are deeply problematic, namely the (neo-Calvinist) *restoration* of creation (where evolution and natural evil is underplayed), or the (Roman-Catholic) *elevation* of human nature in terms of transfiguration or recapitulation (or liberal notions of education and development), or the (Anabaptist) *replacement* of nature with God's new creation (where the problems posed by evolution through natural election and natural evil are nowadays highlighted) or a (secularist) recycling of that which is natural (where nature will inevitably save itself without much of a role for God). Alternatives to these options do not seem to be forthcoming.

The underlying difficulties may also be illustrated by the criticisms of "Christomonism" and a "binitarian" theology raised against Karl Barth who was responsible for the renaissance of trinitarian theology in the 20th century. Regin Prenter (1946) accused Barth of "creation docetism" while Gustaf Wingren went so far as to suggest that Barth influenced many to regard the first article of the Christian creed as a Nazi principle (see Vander Goot 1981:145). Although these criticisms may well be refuted through Barthian scholarship, they do suggest that a trinitarian theology needs to go beyond a mere affirmation of relatedness to explore the nature of the relationship in all its complexity.

In a section of his meditations on the Apostolicum Van Ruler comments on the dramatic significance of the word "and" between the first and the second articles of the creed. He says:

The most important aspect of the word "and" still lies elsewhere. It links two aspects with each other and distinguishes them also. On the one side stands the confession of God as Creator. This expresses the awesome mystery of being: we experience being as creation

and therefore as gift. On the other side stands the confession of God as Saviour. This expresses the almost equally awesome mystery of salvation (*heil*): we experience ourselves not as lost in the abyss of meaninglessness or guilt, but as kept unto eternal life. ... These are two enormous themes: the theme of being and of salvation. The confession links and distinguishes these two themes in a carefree (*argeloze*) way through the simply word “and”. The theme of being comes first, salvation follows upon that. That we are is more fundamental and deeper than that we are saved. Therefore this particular sequence. However, we should not replace this sequence with a contrast. Being and salvation are linked with each other through the word “and”. Salvation means that being is saved from decay (*verderf*) and can be again. Creation is the primary matter. It is kept for all eternity. That is salvation (Van Ruler, *Ik Geloof*, no date:46, my translation).

To summarise: if justice is not so easily done to both God’s work of creation and salvation (and this seems to be an almost insurmountable problem), an affirmation of the intimate relationship between Father and Son remains all too easy and cheap.

THE SECOND AND THE THIRD ARTICLES: DOING JUSTICE TO CHRIST AND THE SPIRIT

While the *filioque* controversy may be regarded as a highly technical theological dispute (see especially Oberdorfer 2001), the underlying issue of the relationship between the Christ and the Holy Spirit is of immense pastoral significance. One may argue that it continues to divide Christianity in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. Such ecumenical conflict provides another test case for a “fully trinitarian” theology.

Mainline and evangelical churches tend to maintain a strong Christological and ecclesiological emphasis. The Spirit completes the work of Christ. The Spirit works through the body of Christ (the church), the various offices of and the structures of governances in the church, the ministry of the sacraments (the body and blood of Christ) and especially the apostolic witnesses to Christ (the Bible). The clarity of the work of the Spirit is emphasised on the basis of these functions. The Spirit works in the state and in civil society but only through the ministries of the church in the world. At best, the movement of the Spirit can be discerned through an exegesis of the letter of the biblical texts and through processes of spiritual formation and higher education. At worst, the movement of the Spirit is controlled on the basis of ecclesiastical authority, for example in gate keeping around access to the sacraments, the baptism of children of secular parents, church discipline against those who are baptised again as adults, exclusion to the holy communion on the basis of race, class or sexual orientation, the right to a church-based marriage and funeral and so forth. According to critics, such control of the movement of the Spirit can only lead to intellectualism and spiritual aridness.

By contrast, the freedom of the Spirit to “blow wherever it wants to” is emphasised in a variety of other Christian movements (see the essays in *Scriptura* Volume 79 – Conradie 2002). These movements include, to a lesser or a greater extent, a variety of indigenous theologies (“God’s Spirit was here in South Africa before the message about Jesus Christ arrived”), Pentecostal theologies, including African Pentecostalism (the free gifts of the Spirit), liberation theologies (the political work of the Spirit outside the church), feminist theologies (the feminine face of the Spirit as a counter to a male Christ), religious pluralism (the universality of the Spirit is preferred to the exclusiveness of Christ) and perhaps also ecological theologies (the cosmic scope of the Spirit’s presence). Critics from mainline churches recognise the attractions of these

movements, envy the numerical growth of new Pentecostal churches, but also warn about the need to discern the spirits. Not every Spirit may be called the Spirit of Christ. Thus mutual suspicions remain rife. One example of this tension is the differences in ecumenical theology between those who adopt a Christological orientation (e.g. Geoffrey Wainwright) and those who call for a pneumatological reorientation in the name of a fully trinitarian approach (e.g. Konrad Raiser). The spread of Orthodox Christianity in South Africa (especially in its Coptic and Ethiopian forms) may offer a distinct and perhaps illuminating position within this tension.

Theologically, this requires much deeper reflection on the relationship between the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. One may use the work of Christ as a point of departure to reflect on the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit. For me, Arnold van Ruler's remarkable essay (1989:27-47) on several significant structural differences between Christology and pneumatology points in the appropriate direction. One may also regard the life and work of Jesus Christ as one manifestation of the movement of God's Spirit. For me, Michael Welker's portrayal (1994) of the emerging clarity in the biblical roots of Christianity on the movement of God's Spirit remains extremely helpful. Klaus Nürnberger's very different account (2002) of the interpretation of the work of the Spirit completes the story regarding the subsequent history of Christianity, but in my view also illustrates how difficult a fully trinitarian theology may be, given the many connotations attached to "spirit" in philosophy and theology alike.

THE FIRST AND THE THIRD ARTICLES: DOING JUSTICE TO THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR

The relationship between God the Father / Mother and the Holy Spirit poses another test case for a fully trinitarian theology. Here a different set of issues emerges. Perhaps this becomes most evident in Christian responses to religious diversity. This forms a test case for an affirmation of the doctrine of the trinity in ecclesial praxis, also and especially in the African context. For many African Christians, the only way to engage with people of other faiths is to acknowledge that "God has many names" and that knowing God as the Father of Jesus Christ is only one such name for the Supreme Being. Thus faith in the triune God is reduced to faith in God the Father on the basis of some form of subordinism, the link between the immanent trinity and the economic trinity is discarded and God's revelation is clouded. The God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is different from the actual One behind the mask in the sense that the Supreme Being cannot be immediately named as the Father of Jesus Christ. Ironically, the Spirit (or a vague sense of spirituality) provides the generic category to place different notions of the transcendent, of Ultimate Mystery alongside each other, thus compromising their ultimacy. In other words, there are many claims to discern the movement of the Spirit in the context of the African Spirit world. However, it is not all that clear if and when this Spirit proceeds from the Father, at least not the Father of Jesus Christ.

While no trinitarian theologian would put the matter in such crude terms, the challenges for ecclesial praxis remain undeniable in a world characterised by the peaceful co-existence of different religious traditions, if not by a "clash of civilisations" and religious-infused conflict (for example in Nigeria or the Sudan). How could faith in the triune God plausibly guide Christians in such a context? How can the trinitarian mystery be protected doxologically? Only a fully trinitarian theology will do, but where can such a trinitarian theology be found?

CONCLUSION

The argument of this contribution has been that a “fully trinitarian” theology cannot emerge only on the basis of an inner-trinitarian exploration of the social analogy or the psychological analogy. The issues identified in the three sections above provide test cases for a trinitarian theology and set an agenda in this regard. They serve as a protocol against trinitarian short cuts. Each of these issues can only be addressed in a trinitarian way. However, this does not merely imply that three different perspectives (rather than one) need to be offered on each of these issues. This form of “Trinitarian spread” (Noordmans) is in my view entirely appropriate and adds a certain richness to the discussion of any theological, ethical or contextual topic. However, this would not suffice. Instead, the question is whether justice can be done to the work of Father, Son and Spirit. Can the tensions be maintained and not be resolved prematurely? As the discussion above illustrates, all too often the tension is collapsed by subsuming one category under another with far-reaching pastoral implications. This can only undermine the plausibility of a Trinitarian theology. It remains elusive, something like a theological vision that cannot be attained easily.

In the interim an affirmation of trinitarian theology remains important. As Herman Bavinck recognised, this affirmation has to focus on the work and not only the identity of the triune God. He formulated this in terms of the tension between creation and re-creation:

The God of creation and of the Old Testament is not lower than the God of re-creation, than the Father of Christ, than the God of the new covenant. Christ, the mediator of the new covenant is also he by whom God created all things. And the Holy Spirit who is the author of regeneration and sanctification is the same as he who in the beginning hovered over the waters and adorned the heavens. Creation and re-creation, therefore cannot be contrasted in terms of being lower and higher. They are both good and pure – splendid works of the one Triune God (Bavinck 2008:436).

Only on this basis can one entertain the beauty of an inner-trinitarian perichoresis (literary: dancing around) in which we as human beings and the whole earth community may participate. Arnold van Ruler (1989:173) captures this in the image of a *reidans* where the focus is on the relation between God’s actions: “Historical reality is fully a divine reality, a dance in round (*reidans*) of God’s deeds. God’s deeds are not yet complete, the Lord God is not yet finished with his world or with his children. All that we as human beings can do is to try with breathless attention to follow God in his journey through time.” God is asking us this question: “May I dance with you?” The core of our human existence lies in our willingness to entertain this question (see, for example, Van Ruler 2009: 170).

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