CHAPTER 3

The Coping-stone of Christian Doctrine – The Resurgence of Trinitarian Thinking

In this chapter we trace the development of what the American theologian Ted Peters has called “Trinity talk,” from its revival in the theological writing of Karl Barth in the 1930s to current insights which urge us to interpret the relationship between God and his creation – personal and non-personal – in terms of dynamic ‘open’ relationality. In the process we will examine the connection between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity, which some have collapsed into one, either to avoid the alleged irrelevance of metaphysical speculation regarding the ontology of the trinitarian being, or to give substantial weight to temporality within the life of God. In effect, the trinitarian debate throughout the twentieth century has been the story of the creative tension between the transcendence and immanence of God. The chapter closes with an evaluation of the concept of perichoresis as an expression of the dynamic relationality that characterises not only the inner life of Father, Son and Spirit, but also the life of the Trinity ad extra both in human society and within the natural world.

Beginning with Barth

Many contemporary theologians trace the resurgence in trinitarian thinking to Karl Barth, whose insights gave rise to a renewed emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity during the second half of the twentieth century. Peters observes that during this period Barth’s “method of analysis of scriptural revelation” as his basis for trinitarian theology has, in theological debate, triumphed over Schleiermacher’s “method of synthesis” based upon human experiences of God. For Barth, the Trinity was “decisive and controlling for the whole of dogmatics”; it represented “the first word as that which gives us information on the concrete and decisive question: Who is God?” Accordingly, the Trinity is not just one of many Christian doctrines: it is “the basic presupposition of the doctrine of God.”

Schleiermacher regarded the concept of the Trinity as “the coping-stone of Christian doctrine (der Schlußstein der christlichen Lehre).” However, this metaphor greatly exaggerates his actual interpretation of trinitarianism: his overriding monotheistic emphasis on divine unity caused his advocacy of the Trinity to be located in his epilegomena. For Schleiermacher, Trinity language is secondary rather than primary: “It is not an immediate utterance concerning the Christian self-consciousness.” The American Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson, dismisses Schleiermacher’s concept of the Trinity as a “bungle”, not only because of its summary relegation to the end of his systematics, but also because of its Arian characteristics. Schleiermacher was unable to shake himself free from classical metaphysical conceptions of God, in which attributes of immutability and timelessness were central. As we shall see, it is precisely this rather flat Augustinian idea of “an abstractly simple divine essence” which has dominated Western trinitarian reflection and explication, to the point where, until Barth, the doctrine tended to be articulated in philosophical rather than biblical language.

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2 Ibid: 10.
3 Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics* [hereinafter referred to as *CD* in these chapter footnotes] 1/1, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936: 303.
5 Barth, *CD* 1/2, 1956: 312.
7 Ibid: 738.
9 Jenson, *Triune Identity*: 120.
Barth was insistent that God’s being and God’s act were not to be isolated from each other: so “this subject, God, the Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect.”10 Barth does not follow through this insight as fully as he could have in terms of the relational dynamic intrinsic to the nature of the Trinity, although in his later theological writing, referring to theology as a ‘bird in flight’, in contrast to a ‘caged bird’11, he specifically alludes to a more dynamic interpretation of the relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What is of major significance in Barth’s thesis, however, is his explication of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of his doctrine of revelation. In fact, we might say that, for Barth, revelation rather than relationality is the essential controlling paradigm for trinitarian discourse.

Barth expresses the sum of his revelational thought about the Trinity in the following words: “God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals Himself.”12 So God is the ‘Who’, the ‘How’ and the ‘What’ of revelation – he is Revealer, Revealedness and Revelation, the self-revealing God and his own self-revelation. So for Barth the doctrine of the Trinity derives from a revelational basis, as distinct from philosophical, naturalistic or anthropological insights: “When we ask: Who is the self-revealing God? the Bible answers in such a way that we have to reflect on the triunity of God.”13 Accordingly, Barth’s theological framework demands that the Christian concept of revelation already includes within it the concept of the doctrine of the Trinity, in which God reveals Himself as the Lord – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So the Father is revealed in the Son, and this revelation is the distinctive work of the Spirit, who alone enables human beings to understand God’s self-revelation as revelation. So Barth states his proposition that

He whom the Christian church calls God and proclaims as God, the God who has revealed Himself according to the witness of Scripture, is the same in unimpaired unity and yet also the same thrice in different ways in unimpaired distinction.14

As dogma, trinitarianism is, in the first place, good interpretation of the Bible. Barth dismisses analogues of the trinitarian God of Christian revelation (he cites five categories of phenomena which might reflect vestigia trinitatis: nature, culture, history, religion and the human soul15) on the basis that vestigia trinitatis in creatura do not display the indissoluble unity and the indestructible distinction implicit in the biblical revelation of the divine Trinity. Ultimately, “revelation will submit only to interpretation and not to illustration.”16

Barth has quite rightly been lauded for bringing the Trinity into the centre of the stage of theological discussion. With Augustine, he is content to affirm the mystery of the Trinity. The patristic scholar G. L. Prestige notes that “Augustine was neither alarmed nor surprised to find that the Greeks interpreted the Trinity differently from the Latins.” He quotes Augustine:

For the sake of describing things ineffable, that we may be able in some way to express what we are in no way able to express fully, our Greek friends have spoken of one essence and three substances, but the Latins of one essence or substance and three persons.17

For Augustine the notion of Trinity was mystery, challenging attempts to be precise with regard to terminology, and therefore surpassing human discourse. Likewise, Barth eschews speculation, maintaining that “all rational wrestling with this mystery, the more serious it is, can lead only to its fresh and authentic interpretation and manifestation as mystery.”18 Perhaps it is this espousal of mystery, as well as his inherent dislike of anything that might allude to theism or encourage comparison with modern concepts of human individual personality, that caused Barth to prefer the phrase “modes of being” (Seinsweisen) to “persons” in his trinitarian theology.19 Barth has been criticised for his modalistic tendencies, though later on he explicitly

10 Barth, CD 1/1: 296.
11 So, in his Evangelical Theology, Barth writes that “in its perception, meditation, and discussion, theology must have the character of a living procession. Evangelical theology would forfeit its object, it would belie and negate itself, if it wished to view, to understand, and to describe any one moment of the divine procession in ‘splendid isolation’ from others. Instead, theology must describe the dynamic interrelationships which make this procession comparable to a bird in flight, in contrast to a caged bird.” (Barth, Karl, Evangelical Theology: An Introduction, London: Collins Fontana, 1963: 15).
12 Barth, CD 1/1: 296, author’s italics.
16 Ibid: 345.
18 Barth, CD 1/1: 368.
rejected modalism in his affirmation of the distinctiveness of the three persons of the Trinity.  
Barth adopts the word “trinity” (Dreieinigkeit) as a linguistic conflation of “unity in trinity” and “trinity in unity”, postulating the unity of Father, Son and Spirit among themselves. In this connection he introduces the concept of perichoresis, concurring with Pohle that it was legitimate to interpret the concept as the final sum of the doctrine of unitas in trinitate and trinitas in unitate. It is noticeable, however, that Barth’s discussion of perichoresis, defined as the participation of each mode of being in the other modes of being, does not convey any sense of dynamic movement or energy: rather, the language is one of co-existence ad intra. As Alan Torrance notes, Barth prefers the Latin translation circuminsessio, denoting a “dwelling in one another”, to the alternative circumincessio, conveying the idea of “passing into one another”, because the former notion of “spatial juxtaposition” is more appropriate than a “temporal sequence” implied in the latter translation. For Torrance, Barth grounds his exposition of the Trinity dialectically rather than dynamically in terms of the category of communion.

Why should this be so? Though Barth sees God’s work and essence as not twofold but one, so making explicit the correspondence between ad intra and ad extra, he nonetheless maintains that we must also distinguish his essence from his work, since we are limited by creaturely comprehensibility with regard to God’s trinity. Barth’s emphasis in his Church Dogmatics is on the God who reveals himself, especially in the history of Jesus Christ, as God, and explicitly the triune God of grace (thus negating the claims of natural theology). Therefore, while he emphasizes correspondence between essence and work, it is evident in his trinitarian theology that he wants to leave a space between them.

The result is that his discussion of the doctrines of perichoresis and appropriation in his theology of the Trinity speak to us more of the being of God than of the actions of God. Of course, for Barth, God’s being is God’s act, and the principle of correspondence means that we can work backwards from God’s act to a statement about God’s being. But at all times we have to keep in mind that the incarnation is God’s self-communication: God does what he does because he is who he is. Our trinitarian statements are therefore predicated on God’s self-revelation.

If, as Barth affirms, there is a correspondence between the Trinity ad intra and ad extra, one way of understanding God’s self-communication in the history of the world through Jesus Christ is that in some way God’s action in the world becomes constitutive of God’s essential being ad intra. This takes us beyond the language of correspondence, and represents more closely the axiom proposed by the Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and vice versa. Barth does not take us that far: in his concern to preserve the ‘wholly otherness’ of God, he falls short of equating immanent and economic Trinity, with the result that his theology of intratrinitarian divine life tends towards the historically static doctrine of relations, as developed by Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, rather than the dynamic, interactive relationality characteristic of contemporary trinitarian reflection.

Alan Torrance rightly discerns some ambiguity in Barth’s thought here, particularly in “his continual reminders of the need to interpret the Seinsweisen in relational terms.” For Barth, the idea of ‘relations’ appears to be rather elastic, taking on different nuances of meaning in his discussion, but in each case “radically different from that unique and specific redefinition of the term ‘relation’ denoted when reference is made to the dynamic mutuality of the inner communion between the Father and Son in the Spirit.” Besides noting the need in Barth’s trinitarian theology for a “more unambiguous affirmation of the primordial nature of the intrapersonal communion of the Trinity”, Torrance critiques Barth’s overdependence on the biblical concept of revelation at the expense of the biblical content of revelation in his advocacy of the term Seinsweisen.

Barth’s preference for the language of ‘I’ at the centre of God rather than ‘we’ reflects his resolution to affirm the central thesis of the sovereignty of God, but the hazard here is that dynamic mutuality is diminished in the process. Barth is aware of this danger, but in Torrance’s view fails to deal with the problem with adequate
consistency. The underlying complaint in Torrance’s critique is that Barth’s trinitarian discussion is grounded in an abstract ‘revelation model’ that is too narrowly conceived: it fails to do justice to human participation in the intra-divine life. So Torrance proposes a ‘doxological’ or ‘communion’ model that offers “a closer integration of the trinitas ad intra and the divine economy”29, in which the notion of koinonia as a dynamic reality takes its place as a “controlled reinterpretation” of Barth’s triune structure of revelation.

Of course, Barth’s understanding of the freedom of God expressed as love (particularly in terms of correspondence between essence and work) is suggestive of dynamic relationality ad extra. For example, he insists that an aspect of God’s freedom is his right to be free with regard to his freedom. God is not a prisoner of his own freedom. Referring to God’s activity as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer, he argues that “God must not only be unconditioned but, in the absoluteness in which he sets up this fellowship, He can and also will be conditioned.”30 This is indicative of a free intercourse between God and humanity that cannot be reduced to static interpretation. Alongside this, however, Barth’s conception of God’s freedom is expressed supremely as transcendence: “The loftiness, the sovereign majesty, the holiness, the glory – even what is termed the transcendence of God – what is it but this self-determination, this freedom, of the divine living and loving, the divine person?”31 God’s freedom both preserves and is determined by his otherness, his absolute independence from all that he has created. Others following Barth have diluted transcendence to the point where the distinction between transcendence and immanence has been almost dissolved. But for Barth God’s transcendence is the sum of his freedom, which incorporates his freedom to be immanent: it must not, indeed cannot, be weakened. For other theologians after him, God’s freedom is expressed more impressively by his immanence. It is within the tension of these two positions that theologians have debated the relationship between God and the world.

**Being and Becoming**

Notwithstanding a number of limitations in Barth’s trinitarian insights, it is clear that he opened the door, and opened it very widely, that others might enter into a rich exploration of the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly from the perspective of the interaction between God and the world. One of Barth’s pupils, Eberhard Jungel, affirms his mentor’s emphasis on revelation as the starting-point for all trinitarian reflection. He also reinforces Barth’s christological assertion of God’s self-communication as a reiteration of his innertrinitarian identity, made explicit in the historical person of Jesus Christ: “it is the event of Jesus Christ’s death on the cross which calls the being of God into question and presses for a trinitarian statement.”32 Having asserted that the Church Dogmatics is “a brilliant and diligent attempt to reconstruct in thought the movement of the statement ‘God corresponds to himself’”,33 Jungel then takes the theme of correspondence further.

But what exactly does Jungel understand by the term ‘correspondence’? He argues that God’s being ad intra is relationally structured: relationality, or self-relatedness, is ontologically characteristic of God himself: there is differentiation within the divine life. The question then arises: how does the “taking up of humanity into the event of God’s being, which comes to us from God as salvation”34, correspond with the divine life? Clearly incarnation implies relationality: Jesus, the word made flesh, is

other from the perspective of the first person of the Trinity, the Father. This otherness permits us to think of him as God’s Son while, at the same time, due to the unifying work of the Holy Spirit, he constitutes the presence of God in the finite world.35

For Jungel, there cannot be relationality in incarnation, that is in the economy of salvation, without there being antecedent relationality ad intra. There is therefore a correspondence which moves from ad intra to ad extra.

But can we posit a correspondence in the other direction? The problem here for Jungel is that we might find ourselves proposing some form of ontological dependence of the divine being on that which is other to himself. Put another way, can we say that God’s being is constituted by his temporal relations with the world? Such a

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29 *Ibid*; 308.
33 *Ibid*; 36.
34 *Ibid*; 75-76.
36 Jungel, *God’s Being is in Becoming*: 114.
Jungel gets round this dilemma by introducing the eschatological notion of becoming on the basis that God has already in freedom taken up historicity into his divine life: God’s becoming is therefore predicated on his relationship with creation. God could have been the same God had there been no creation, but God in his freedom as God chose to bring creation into being and to relate to humanity as an ontologically relational being. God does not become other than he always has been from eternity: rather, he “continues unceasingly to be what he always is and ever will be in the living movement of his eternal Being.”

37 For Jungel, God’s being is defined eschatologically as a becoming, a dynamic process in which the fullness of his being is expressed in his determination to fulfil his eternal purposes for humanity, the consummation of salvation.

Like Barth, Jungel’s doctrine of the Spirit does not surface in his discussion of God’s becoming, reflecting what Jenson regards as Barth’s own “exemplary use of Western doctrine” which “displays what can only be called an ‘I-Thou’ trinitarianism.”

38 Whilst acknowledging important trinitarian strands in Barth’s doctrine of the Spirit, Tom Smail comments that “in his later theology there is a growing tendency to regard the Spirit as simply the way the risen Christ goes on acting in the church.”

39 Other trinitarian theologians, including Jenson, interpret the dynamic relationship between the triune God and the world with a robust pneumatology, drawing their inspiration from Cappadocian theology. Before giving more detailed consideration to their contribution to contemporary trinitarian debate, it is worth noting Peters’ criticism of what he interprets as Jungel’s preoccupation with the internal relations within the Trinity that are independent of God’s relations to the world:

If Jungel is really serious when he says that the historical event of Jesus Christ means that ‘God has defined himself as a human God’, then why not make God’s incarnate intercourse with the world part of that ongoing process of divine self-definition?

40 John Webster’s judgment that Peters’ critique of Jungel is a “process-theological aversion to any notion of divine aseity” highlights further the question of divine activity in the world, which Peters addresses in his discussion of the relationship between the temporal and the eternal Trinity.

41 However, the key to Peters’ trinitarian theology is not the divine limitation of process thought but the divine fulfilment of eschatological convergence:

the trail of salvation traversed by God implies that the divine life ad intra has been put at risk by the incarnation of the Son and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit so that it comes to incorporate the divine life ad extra. That which needs convergence, then, is temporal history and the otherness of the divine persons with the eschatological advent of the eternal perichoresis.

42 This takes us beyond the ambiguity of correspondence to Rahner’s axiom that the immanent and economic Trinity are in fact the same.

‘Rahner’s Rule’

Karl Rahner’s theology was conceived, in part, as a major attempt to overcome the classical dualism between transcendence and immanence. Whilst Barth’s starting point was the transcendence of God, Rahner’s theological method employed the tools of philosophical anthropology in order to demonstrate that human beings are created with an in-built capacity for God. Rahner’s starting point is that human beings are transcendental beings who, by virtue of their transcendence, are inevitably oriented towards the ineffable mystery of God. Writing of humanity’s transcendental orientation towards mystery, he insists that “He who is essentially open to being cannot by his own capacities set limits to the possible object of a revelation.” Elsewhere, he writes that “In the fact that he experiences his finiteness radically, he reaches beyond this finiteness and experiences

40 Peters, God as Trinity: 96.
41 John Webster in “Translator’s Introduction” in Jungel, God’s Being is in Becoming: xii.
42 Peters, God as Trinity: 146-187.
himself as a transcendent being, as spirit.”

It is precisely because this transcendent capacity is an experience of grace that Rahner sees no contradiction between the knowledge of God as that which is given a priori to human beings and knowledge that derives from God’s self-revelation. These observations are significant, for mystery characterises his theology of the Trinity. For Rahner “the doctrine of the Trinity is not a subtle theological and speculative game” but represents “the simple statement which is at once so very incomprehensible and so very self-evident, namely, that God himself as the abiding and holy mystery, as the incomprehensible ground of man’s transcendent existence is not only the God of infinite distance, but also wants to be the God of absolute closeness in a true self-communication.”

There are several strands in Rahner’s theology that are relevant to our present discussion. Rahner insisted that in the economy of salvation history particular realities are not only appropriated to a certain divine person, but are ‘proper’ to him. His theology of the incarnation, as a prime example, demands that only the Son could have become incarnate; likewise, only the Spirit is able to sanctify. Writing of the ‘sending’ of the Logos, Rahner argues that “something takes place in the world itself, outside the immanent divine life, which is not simply the result of the efficient causality of the triune God working as one nature in the world.” This statement enables us to posit a clear correspondence between the economy of salvation and the immanent Trinity: for Rahner the Trinity is a mystery of salvation. We can have confidence that “the divine hypostasis we experience within history corresponds to the same hypostasis within the Godhead proper”: what we know of God in his salvific acts in history reflect the reality of God’s being-in-communion. Consistent with his desire to bridge the transcendent and the immanent, Rahner thus postulates an axiom (popularly known as ‘Rahner’s Rule’) that has become a watershed in trinitarian theology: the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, and vice versa.

For Rahner, the doctrine of grace implies that God really gives himself to human beings: he really appears as he is in himself. This is God’s self-communicated gift to creation through grace. This concept, when coupled with his doctrine of the transcendent openness of humanity, leads us to Rahner’s integrated theology of divine communion and a participative anthropology as formulated in his axiom. However, as in Barth, there is in Rahner’s theology of the immanent Trinity a predisposition towards a static ontology, which does not sit well with the dynamic relationality implicit in the economy of salvation, causing Alan Torrance to raise the question as to “how seriously he is committed in practice to the two-way identification of the economic and immanent Trinities.” In particular, Torrance refers to Rahner’s statement that “there is properly no mutual love between Father and Son, for this would presuppose two acts”, which suggests an abstract immanent Trinity very much at odds with the logic of the incarnation as dynamic event.

The problem here might lie with Rahner’s interpretation of the word ‘person’, a concept which he recognises as both blurred and ambiguous: therefore “the statement that ‘God is a person’ can be asserted of God and is true of God only if, in asserting and understanding this statement, we open it to the ineffable darkness of the holy mystery.” Later in his Foundations of Christian Faith, he acknowledges the individualistic connotations of secular language about persons, asserting that “this is the very thing which is excluded by the dogmatic teaching on the single and unique essence of God.” Here we recognise Rahner’s concern not to lose sight of classical and idealistic notions of God which focus on the primacy and perfection of the divine essence: “one single consciousness and one single freedom.”

Rahner’s Barthian predisposition towards a classical ontology of the personhood of God should not, however, be interpreted in terms of detached asety. His discussion of the incarnation makes this clear. God has become man: in some ineffable way there is change in God. “It will hardly be denied that here the traditional philosophy and theology of the schools begins to blink and stutter”, Rahner wryly observes. And so the mystery of the incarnation is invoked, in which “the change and transition takes place in the created reality which is assumed, and theology of the schools begins to blink and stutter”, Rahner wryly observes. And so the mystery of the incarnation is invoked, in which “the change and transition takes place in the created reality which is assumed, and theology of the schools begins to blink and stutter”, Rahner wryly observes. 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46 Ibid: 137.
48 Peters, God as Trinity: 100.
49 Torrance, Alan J., Persons in Communion: 265.
50 Ibid: 276.
54 Ibid: 135.
56 Ibid: 113, my italics.
and not in the Logos.” In this way, Rahner sustains the doctrine of the immutability of God, but only at the expense of making a questionable distinction between internal and external change. For LaCugna, this is tantamount to positing two ‘levels’ to the Trinity, one ad intra, the other ad extra. Alan Torrance is equally severe: alluding to Christopher Kaiser’s comment about Augustine’s “complete dissociation of [the] eternal intra-trinitarian relations from ordinary human relations” he ascribes to Rahner the same Augustinian static concept of deity.

The Cappadocian Connection

The critical issue exposed in the above treatment of Barth and Rahner has been admirably expressed by Langdon Gilkey:

the central problem for the doctrine of God is how to unite intelligibly the absoluteness of God as the unconditioned source of our total being with the dynamic relatedness and the reciprocal activity of God as the ground, guide, dialogical partner, and redeemer of our freedom.

We turn therefore to a number of important theologians who have grappled with this dilemma and emerged with coherent trinitarian statements that give primacy to the Eastern (Cappadocian) emphasis on relatedness and reciprocity. The major contributors are Robert Jenson, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Catherine LaCugna. The insights of Colin Gunton and Thomas Torrance will also be raised in the context of their contributions to the theology of creation and God’s relationship with the natural world. This will set the scene for a more detailed examination of perichoresis as a dynamic relational concept within trinitarian thought.

The unique contribution of the Cappadocian Fathers to trinitarian theology in the second half of the fourth century lies in their determination to eliminate any notion of the Father, Son and Spirit as modalistic roles, an interpretation implicit in the Greek word prosopon with its theatrical associations. Rejecting the term prosopon to denote personhood, the Cappadocians revived the term hypostasis, stripped it of its earlier Athanasian associations with ousia, and attributed to it relational significance. In order to avoid the charge of tritheism, they made a clear distinction between substance in God (ousia) and the hypostases of the three persons: “each of the divine hypostases is the ousia or essence of Godhead determined by its appropriate particularizing characteristic”; for Basil, bishop of Caesarea, for example, these identifying properties (idiomata) were paternity, sonship and sanctifying power. Other Cappadocian terms used to describe these properties were ‘unbegottenness’, ‘begottenness’ and ‘spiration’. The important point here is that these particular identifying properties characterised not the substance or essence of God, but the unique personhood of Father, Son and Spirit.

It is clear that the properties identified by the Cappadocian Fathers are relational in their ontology, consistent with the relational properties implicit in the divine economy. The starting-point for Eastern trinitarian theology, therefore, was a redefined hypostasis with relational attributes, in contrast to the Western emphasis on the unity, or oneness, of God. However, the Cappadocians were clear in affirming the one nature of God, finding the ground of unity in the person of the Father, rather than in the indivisible nature of God. The result of the primacy of person over substance is to give not only ontological priority to the person, but also ontological freedom.

The Greek Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas elucidates this with reference to Neoplatonic thought, “which tended to give priority to the ‘one’ over the ‘many’”, identifying the ‘One’ and God Himself, considering the multiplicity of beings, the ‘many’, to be emanations basically of a degrading nature, so that the return to the ‘One’ through the recollection of the soul was thought to be the purpose and aim of all existence.” The Cappadocian response gave ontological integrity to the ‘many’, which Zizioulas interprets as freedom not only for the three persons of the Trinity but also, via the concept of imago Dei, for human beings.

57 Peters, God as Trinity: 101.
63 This is developed most fully in Zizioulas, John D., Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985.
By distinguishing carefully and persistently between the nature of God and God as the Father [the Cappadocians] thought that what causes God to be is the Person of the Father, not the one divine substance. By so doing they gave to the person ontological priority, and thus freed existence from the logical necessity of substance, of the ‘self-existent’.

For the Cappadocian Fathers, therefore, the concept of person was not individualistic, but relational. God is actually God by virtue of the loving relationships that exist within the divine life: it is the relations between the divine persons which constitute the unity of God. Father, Son and Spirit are united in such perichoretic union that it is impossible to imagine any one person existing without the others. The being of each person of the Trinity lies in the fact that each exists for the other, which is the antithesis of individualism. Each person of the Trinity is thus free to relate to the other two, not by the necessity of the divine nature as exemplified in classical Greek thought, but out of self-giving love within the divine communion. “Generation (and spiration) are not necessary but free because although there is one will ‘concurrent’ (as St Cyril of Alexandria would say) with the divine substance, there is the ‘willing one’ (ho thelon) and that is the Father.” The priority of person over nature in Cappadocian trinitarian theology secures this revolutionary understanding of ontological freedom in God.

In his analysis of the person of the Spirit in trinitarian theology, Robert Jenson articulates the issue in the form of a question: “Is Pentecost a peer of Easter or does it merely display a meaning that Easter would in any case have?” Thus he addresses what he calls “the pneumatological problem”: “Do we truly think of the Spirit as person?” This is a critical question because, for Jenson, the Spirit is the key to his eschatological resolution of the imminent-economic debate within a Cappadocian framework. Throughout his writings, Jenson’s depiction of the Spirit as the ‘Power of the Future’ or the ‘Power of the Eschaton’ is repeatedly sustained. Quoting Jesus’ words in Matthew 12:28 (“But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you”) as indicative of the parity between the power of the Spirit and the immanence of the Kingdom, he defines the Spirit as “the Love into which all things will at the last be brought.” For Jenson, the Spirit’s ‘identity’ (a term coined by Jenson to refer to the person of each of the three members of the Trinity) is a personal one. He is more than a link between Father and Son, though Colin Gunton criticises Jenson for what he perceives to be an adherence to Augustinian binitarianism, a tendency which, admittedly, is not altogether absent in some of Jenson’s writing.

Gunton’s critique is related to his concern to maintain a clear distinction between immanence and otherness in trinitarian theology, so that freedom in God (and humans) is maintained. His interpretation of Jenson’s pneumatology relates to what he discerns as a failure to attribute particularity and distinctness to the persons of the Godhead. Once that happens, then it is not too far a step towards the undifferentiated unity characteristic of Western trinitarianism. However, Jenson’s debt to Cappadocian theology’s emphasis on inner-trinitarian relationality is explicit in his doctrine of the Trinity: he refers to Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus as powerful thinkers in “a brilliant new generation of bishops and teachers.” Approving the Eastern tradition in which ‘God’ denotes a lively complex of energeia, he brings the divine economy and immanence in close proximity by asserting that

‘God’ simply as such denotes the Father’s sending and the Son’s obedience, the Spirit’s coming to the Son and the Son’s thanksgiving therefore to the Father – and so on in a dialectic to which only failing insight or imagination sets limits.

Jenson expounds Rahner’s axiom by claiming that the temporality of salvation history is intrinsic to the life of Father, Son and Spirit. The biblical endorsement of the Cretan poet Epimenides’ statement that “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) suggests that in some way God makes room for temporality in his eternity. Drawing from Gregory of Nyssa, Jenson argues that God is infinite “because time cannot exhaust or keep up with his activity”; so “Hellenic deity is eternal in that in it circling time has its motionless centre:

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65 Ibid: 51.
66 Jenson, Systematic Theology, Vol I - The Triune God: 146.
68 See Jenson, The Triune Identity, 1982: 108-111, in which the author amusingly describes the language of hypostasis as “merely an item of linguistic debris knocked from Hellenic philosophy by collision with Yahweh.”
70 Jenson, The Triune Identity: 89.
71 Jenson, “What is the Point of Trinitarian Theology?”: 38.
Gregory’s God is eternal in that he envelops time, is ahead of and so before it.”

Jenson’s emphasis on the incorporation of time into eternity in God establishes the logic of his doctrine of the Spirit as both personal and dynamic reality: “The Spirit is the Liveliness of the divine life because he is the Power of the divine future.”

What he does is to free the Spirit from narrow, static and impersonal conceptions and locate him at the very centre of a dynamic eschatologically-oriented Trinity, whose goal embraces all humanity. The promise of the gospel is God’s faithfulness to his future, guaranteed by the Spirit of God who is the Power of his own and our future. Jenson agrees that the only theological reason why a distinction needs to be made between the economic and immanent Trinity is to preserve the freedom of both God and human beings. But, he says, “genuine freedom is the reality of possibility, is openness to the future; genuine freedom is Spirit”:

acknowledging God’s utter freedom as Spirit permits Jenson to collapse immanent and economic into each other eschatologically, such that the immanent Trinity is simply the eschatological reality of the economic. At the eschaton, then, the economic Trinity will be fully realised in the immanent Trinity.

The concept of eschatology is an ambiguous one. In its original formulation it referred to the four eschata, or last things, in a chronological sense: death, judgment, heaven and hell. However, as Ingolf Dalferth, reminds us, these things are not just ‘last’: they are, by virtue of their ultimacy, the ‘greatest’. So,

eschatology is not simply an appendix to dogmatics which describes some future events that are in principle beyond our present life and knowledge. It discusses the fundamental normative orientation of our present life in terms of its final end and ultimate points of reference.

Thus it is more appropriate to define eschatology as that which expresses the goal of all creation, human and physical, rather than specific, identifiable eschata. The task of theology is therefore to elucidate “not a series of eschatological topoi but the one eschatological reality of the risen Christ.”

Jenson’s approach is not without its critics. Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, remarks that in his presentation the economic Trinity almost vanishes, arguing that there is a necessary distinction that maintains the priority of the eternal communion of the triune God over that communion’s explication in the history of salvation. Without that distinction, the reality of the one God tends to be dissolved into the process of the world.

Gunton has expressed the same concerns. However, these criticisms should not eclipse Jenson’s major contribution to trinitarian theology, which lies in his dynamic interpretation of the Cappadocian emphasis on the relational character of the Trinity within a future-based concept of time. For Jenson, there is “a continuity over time that strains forward toward the future when Yahweh’s identity will become fully revealed.”

This narrative causality, or ordering, in God is mediated by the Spirit, who confronts Father and Son with novelty and surprise within the divine life. For Jenson, the Spirit connects past, present and future; he is “the future rushing upon us”; he is “the eschatological reality of God.”

The Trinity and the ‘History of God’

The concept of futurity, or history, within the Trinity is one that has been further developed by Moltmann and Pannenberg, whom Grenz identifies as the two theologians who have been most influential in directing attention to the ‘history of God’: “They are convinced that the turn toward history facilitates what in their estimation is a necessary move away from the focus on the one divine subject that captivated the Trinitarian theology of Barth and Rahner.”

Acknowledging that the primary role of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early church had more to do with the praise and vision of God than with the economy of salvation, Moltmann raises the question: “But

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72 Jenson, The Triune Identity: 165.
74 Ibid: 141.
75 Ibid: 141.
77 Ibid: 159.
79 Peters, God as Trinity: 129.
80 Jenson, “What is the Point of Trinitarian Theology?”: 41.
does the doctrine of the Trinity in fact belong in the ‘consideration of the divine majesty’, quite separately from the revelation of God through Christ for us, in our history and in our flesh?’

82 In his book The Crucified God, Moltmann proceeds to refute such a disconnection, insisting that we cannot say of God “who he is of himself and in himself; we can only say who God is for us in the history of Christ which reaches us in our history.”

83 In his trinitarian formulation, this history is encapsulated in the event of the cross, in which suffering is received into the triune life of God. But not only is suffering taken up into the life of God: history is too. For Moltmann the Trinity is an open Trinity, contradicting the immutability, impassibility and timelessness of classical theistic concepts of God. He critiques both Barth and Rahner, arguing that neither “does justice to the history which is played out between Jesus the Son, ‘Abba’ his Father, and the Spirit.”

Moltmann’s ‘salvation-historical’ approach to his doctrine of the Trinity is therefore a project that explores the collaboration between the three triune subjects in the history of the world, and it is ultimately eschatological in its orientation. Believers are, in the language of theosis, caught up into the inner life of God himself, and this is a process which takes place through history, culminating in the consummation of God’s unconditional love which is full of hope: therefore, “the Trinity is no self-contained group in heaven, but an eschatological process open for men on earth, which stems from the cross of Christ.”

85 In Moltmann’s theology the source of trinitarian identity is the cross; indeed, the cross is the centre of all Christian theology. “The nucleus of everything that Christian theology says about ‘God’ is to be found in this Christ event.” To think otherwise is to “speculate in heavenly riddles!”

More specifically, Moltmann spells out a trinitarian interpretation of the cross within the framework of dynamic relationship. The cross is what transpires between Jesus and the Father in the realm of the Spirit: something of personal and cosmic significance happens between the triune persons which actually constitutes their unity as God. Moltmann’s point of departure in his understanding of the Trinity is not the ‘One God’ of philosophical enquiry but the three persons of biblical history, made explicit in Heilsgeschichte.

86 At the cross, there is no death of God, but death takes place in God: Moltmann’s language about the dying of the Son and the grief of the Father as a God-event in trinitarian terms is replete with the dynamic reality of abandonment, surrender and suffering. For example, the Son “suffers in his love being forsaken by the Father as he dies. The Father suffers in his love the grief of the death of the Son.”

Furthermore, Moltmann’s trinitarian theology of the cross is given pneumatological shape - a pneumatologia crucis - in his discussion of the role of the Spirit as a ‘companion in suffering’ in the kenosis and dying of Jesus: “The path the Son takes in his passion is then at the same time the path taken by the Spirit, whose strength will be proved in Jesus’ weakness.”

87 Just as the suffering of the Father is different from the suffering of the Son, so too is the suffering of the Spirit a different form of suffering, for he is Jesus’ strength in Gethsemane and at Golgotha. So Moltmann outlines his trinitarian theologia crucis, in which the three persons of the Trinity participate in the historic outworking of cross and resurrection in dynamic perichoretic interdependency.

This historic unfolding is given eschatological focus in Moltmann’s ‘twofold trinitarian order’, in which the Spirit is vitally involved in the two historic movements of sending and gathering:

In the first order the divine Trinity throws itself open in the sending of the Spirit. It is open for the world, open for time, open for the renewal and unification of the whole creation. In the second order the movement is reversed: in the transfiguration of the world through the Spirit all men turn to God and, moved by the Spirit, come to the Father through Christ the Son. In the glorification of the Spirit, world and time, people and things are gathered to the Father in order to become his world.

For Moltmann, this is the ‘eternal feast of heaven and earth’, it is the ‘dance of the redeemed’, it is Dante’s riso dell’universo. This Spirit-mediated future is a feature of Moltmann’s ‘theology of hope’, in which he

83 Ibid: 238.
86 Ibid: 204.
87 Ibid: 207.
89 Moltmann, The Crucified God: 245; see pp. 235-249 for an exposition of Moltmann’s trinitarian theology of the cross.
91 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: 127, author’s italics.
articulates the Spirit as ‘the power of futurity’ acting in dynamic perichoretic power: “Just as the cross of the Son puts its impress on the inner life of the triune God, so the history of the Spirit moulds the inner life of the triune God through the joy of liberated creation when it is united with God.”

Moltmann’s accent on the energetic perichoretic life within the Trinity is conspicuous in his theology of creation, in which he offers what he defines as a paradigm shift from a hierarchical to a relational theology of creation. This shift towards dynamic perichoretic relationality as the fundamental hermeneutic of Moltmann’s pneumatological doctrine of creation is made explicit in his movement away from the language of ‘order of creation’ to ‘community of creation’ in the “cosmic body and relationships of heaven and earth and the anthropological relationships of soul and man and woman.” Furthermore, and anticipating what we shall be discussing later on, he asks, “Why should not scientific descriptions also discover the complexes of life and thus also complexes of the Spirit?” Moltmann’s hint at a cosmic perichoresis is undeniable here.

In his desire to proclaim this narrative of the dynamic, shifting and essentially open relationships of fellowship and movement between Father, Son and Spirit, into which all humanity has been invited to participate, Moltmann has been criticised for emphasising the immanence of God at the expense of his transcendence. Where, for example, is the sense of mystery, implicit in the trinitarian theologies of Barth and Rahner? Moltmann’s approach has laid him open to the charge of antinomotheism in his robust emphasis on mutual and dynamic relationality. Though he acknowledges a distinction between the immanent and transcendent Trinity on doxological grounds in order not to conflate the two, his critics are concerned that he gives too much ground to the notion of a social Trinity at the expense of divine unity. Whatever the final verdict, it is clear that Moltmann’s major contribution to trinitarian theology is his exposition of a theology of “openness”. The result is that we should finally put to rest, in Peters’ words, “some sort of second God, a trinitarian double, a ghostly immanence hovering behind while unaffected by the actual course of divine-historical events.”

Dalferth suggests that Moltmann’s difficulties with the unity of God contributed to Wolfhart Pannenberg’s search for another way forward. There are two ideas that are fundamental to Pannenberg’s systematic theology, in which the doctrine of the Trinity is “an anticipatory sum of the whole content of Christian dogmatics.” These two central themes are ‘reciprocal self-dedication’ and ‘the rule of God’, which converge in his conclusion that “God, through the creation of the world, made himself radically dependent on this creation and on its history.” Pannenberg draws from the Hegelian insight that the essence of a person is to renounce isolation and exist in self-dedication to another: so Hegel understood the Trinity as three divine persons united

95 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: 161.
96 See Moltmann, History and the Triune God: 125-142, in which he critiques Barth’s insistence upon superiority and subordination as normative for all the conditions in creation that correspond to God. For Moltmann, “the levels of relationship in perichoresis and mutuality within the Trinity, rather than the levels of constitution within the Trinity, are normative for the relationship of God to creation and all the corresponding relationships in creation” (p.132).
97 Ibid: 135-140.
99 Interestingly, Pannenberg observes that Moltmann’s polemic against monotheism in a number of his writings is addressed to the abstract monotheism typical of nineteenth-century thinking: Moltmann is thus, according to Pannenberg, guilty of a “wrong terminological decision”, having “no wish to abandon the unity of God as such” (Pannenberg, Wolfhart, Systematic Theology, Vol. I, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991: 336, n.217).
100 Moltmann maintains that the “assertions of the immanent Trinity about eternal life and the eternal relationships of the triune God in himself have their Sitz im Leben, their situation in life, in the praise and worship of the church.” So, the “economic Trinity” is the object of kerygmatic and practical theology; the ‘immanent Trinity’ is the object of doxological theology.” (Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: 152).
101 See, for example, Pinnock, Clark H. et al, The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God, Downers Grove: IVP, 1994, for a review of the concept of ‘openness theology’: five authors propose an understanding of a God who desires ‘responsive relationship’ with his creatures, challenging Augustinian and Thomist notions of divine immutability, impassibility and foreknowledge. A more recent defence of ‘openness theology’ can be found in Pinnock, Clark H., Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001, where Pinnock reinforces the dynamic, interactive, risky give-and-take relationship between the trinitarian God and human creatures: “God’s perfection is not to be all-controlling or to exist in majestic solitude or to be infinitely egocentric. On the contrary, God’s fair beauty according to Scripture is his own relationality as a trinitie community. It is God’s gracious interactivity, not his hyper-transcendence and/or immobility, which makes him glorious.” (Ibid: 5-6).
102 Peters, God as Trinity: 110.
by virtue of their intense and lively reciprocal self-dedication. This, argues Pannenberg, is precisely the language implicit in the patristic doctrine of *perichoresis*, which he clarifies in his discussion of the doctrine of *unitas in trinitate*. However, he does not eschew monotheism *per se*, which is where his appeal to the “rule of God” is critical.

The key to Pannenberg’s doctrine of God’s rulership lies in the Son’s obedience to the Father:

lordship goes hand in hand with the deity of God. It has its place already in the intratrinitarian life of God, in the reciprocity of the relation between the Son, who freely subjects himself to the lordship of the Father, and the Father, who hands over his lordship to the Son.  

However, Pannenberg’s argument goes further than a simple correspondence between God’s rule *ad intra* and his rule *ad extra*. Having first established that the whole sending of Jesus, as Son of God, is for the glory of the Father and his lordship, and drawing from Athanasius’ argument against the Arians that the Father would not be the Father without the Son, he poses the question as to whether in some way the Father’s deity is in fact dependent upon the Son. At no point does Pannenberg relinquish monotheism in his trinitarian thesis. On the contrary, he insists that Son and Spirit serve the monarchy of the Father, which is therefore “not the presupposition but the result of the common operation of the three persons. It is thus the seal of their unity.” As Grenz succinctly summarises, Pannenberg “understands the deity of each trinitarian person as a received divinity. Each receives divinity as a person-in-relationship with the other two.”

For Pannenberg, this ‘received’, or dependent, divinity is grounded in the economy of salvation: in other words, it is historically and not ontologically determined.

At stake, then, in the creative work of the Father, as well as in the reconciliation imparted through the Son and in the work of the Spirit glorifying them both is the existence of God in the world, without which no existence of God before the foundation of the world could be affirmed either.

Within this framework of the history of creation, Pannenberg’s trinitarian construction assumes both pneumatological and eschatological importance. The Father has made himself dependent upon the course of history, in which the Son’s obedience to death on the cross and the Spirit’s work in consummating the kingdom reflect supremely the dependence of the trinitarian persons on one another in the history of the world.

Peters suggests that the “picture one gets here is of a God who jeopardizes his own divinity in order to engage in historical intercourse with created reality.” But, for Pannenberg, this is precisely the exegesis of the phrase “God is love” for the reconciliation of the world. Love expressed in terms of trinitarian reciprocal self-dedication in the history of creation will find its eschatological completion through the activity of the Spirit in the world. So history determines God’s divinity, such that the unity of God can only be finally established eschatologically, when the kingdom of God is fully realised.

Pannenberg’s theology of the divine essence is thus historically-determined. He argues that we can no longer adopt “traditional ways of basing the trinity of persons on the unity of the Father or of the divine essence because they entail either subordinationism or Sabellianism.” God’s unity cannot be derived “merely by considering the immanent Trinity before the foundation of the world and ignoring the economy of salvation.” The only resolution to this tension is to acknowledge that God’s transcendent unity-in-divinity finds its fullest expression only when history has been finally and completely embraced within the divine life, that is when time

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110 Pannenberg, “Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine of God”: 255. Elsewhere, Pannenberg spells out “the contrast between the trinitarian concept of God and the idea of God as taught by philosophical monotheism in classical antiquity. The trinitarian concept describes the particular unity of the living God, while philosophical monotheism conceived of the dead or static unity of a supreme being as an existing entity indistinguishable within itself. The trinitarian idea of God is congruous with historical process, while the notion of a supreme entity speaks of a ‘divine thing’ outside man’s history. The trinitarian doctrine describes the coming God as the God of love whose future has already arrived and who integrates the past and present world, accepting it to share in his own life forever.” (Pannenberg, Wolfhart, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969: 71).
112 Peters, *God as Trinity*: 141.
has been assumed into eternity. At that time, God will show himself to be what he always has been. Only then will the existence of God be “conclusively decided”\textsuperscript{115}, because God has chosen from eternity to make himself dependent upon his creation for his identity. Peters explicates Pannenberg’s rejection of traditional interpretations of the divine essence by observing that

Son and Spirit share in the divine essence of the Father not just by being begotten or by proceeding from a divine origin, but also by contributing to the kingdom of the Father that is entrusted to the Son and returned to the Father through the Spirit.\textsuperscript{116}

Dalférfth argues that Pannenberg “does not succeed in offering a trinitarian solution to the problem of the unity of God which is more than an eschatological postponement.”\textsuperscript{117} In the light of the above, Dalférfth’s negative interpretation of Pannenberg’s ‘eschatological postponement’ to the problem of God’s unity appears to have some merit: the course of history actually ‘hides’ the reality of the divine unity. But Pannenberg’s emphasis on the mutuality of relations within the economic Trinity does not lead him to surrender the notion of the transcendence of God. Rather, he gives it controversial expression in his pneumatology, in which he understands spirit as field, a concept drawn from nineteenth-century scientific field theory.\textsuperscript{118} Pannenberg proposes that the divine essence can be likened to an ‘incomprehensible field’ of power, which also finds personal expression as the Holy Spirit within the Trinity. Whilst critics have questioned the appropriateness of such a metaphor in the light of God’s personality, others have commended him for recovering the cosmic dimension of Spirit, offering us a more generous and universal perspective of God at work in creation, in which activity all humanity is offered participation.\textsuperscript{119} Pannenberg’s conception of the transcendence of God, therefore, needs to be understood within a pneumatological frame of reference:

As Spirit, God functions as the whole that provides meaning to the finite events of history. This meaning is profoundly future, for only at the end of history do we find the meaning of history and the connection of each event with that meaning.\textsuperscript{120}

With Jenson and Moltmann, Pannenberg’s vision of God is intimately related to the ‘power of the future’. Whilst there are problems in reconciling his thesis of a future which defines and determines the present with a truly open view of the future,\textsuperscript{121} the richness of Pannenberg’s trinitarian theology lies in his insistence that the history of salvation is the concrete context on which God’s identity actually depends, thus anchoring God’s eternal constitution in the reciprocal self-dedicating love of Father, Son and Spirit. His debt to Cappadocian thinking is explicit in his recognition that “the differentiation of the trinitarian persons and the reciprocity of their relationships are foundational for the unity of the economic and immanent Trinity.”\textsuperscript{122}

However, most contemporary trinitarian theologians believe that the Cappadocians did not go far enough: they failed to develop an intimate connection between economic and immanent Trinity, initially posited by Rahner in his axiom, and subsequently explored most fruitfully by Moltmann, Jenson and Pannenberg. In fact, in the judgment of Catherine LaCugna,

by accentuating the distinction between God’s permanently unknowable divine essence, in contrast to what is knowable through God’s self-manifestation in creation, the Cappadocians contributed to a further separation of economy and ‘theology’.\textsuperscript{123}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Pannenberg, “Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine of God”: 255.
  \item Peters, God as Trinity: 142.
  \item The concept of field theory, which leads Pannenberg to reconceptualise God as an infinite field of power, and which enables him to make important connections between science and theology, will be examined in our discussion of perichoresis as a principle of cosmological unity. See Pannenberg, Wolfhart, Systematic Theology, Vol. II, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991: 79-102.
  \item For a discussion of the relationship between past, present and future within a trinitarian framework, see Pannenberg, Wolfhart, “Eternity, Time and the Trinitarian God”, accessed on http://www.ctinquiry.org/publications/pannenberg.htm on 12.03.03.
  \item Pannenberg, “Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine of God”: 252.
  \item LaCugna, God For Us: 10; see also pp300-304, where LaCugna examines some of the classical attributes of God, arguing that they stand in need of reinterpretation.
\end{itemize}
God for Us: The Trinity as Soteriology

LaCugna understands ‘theology’ as the ‘mystery of God’, expressed in classical theism in terms of the traditional metaphysical properties of immutability, omniscience, omnipotence and impassibility. In _God For Us_, she argues passionately for a practical doctrine of the Trinity that eschews the refuge of metaphysical mystery, opting to ground it in God’s life with us and our life with each other. In other words, she collapses the Trinity _ad intra_ into the Trinity _ad extra_, giving priority in her proposal to soteriology. Using Rahner as her point of departure, LaCugna states her basic principle: “Theology is inseparable from soteriology, and _vice versa_.”

LaCugna’s relocation of mystery away from classical ontological statements about God and into the realm of soteriology necessarily leads her to focus the doctrine of the Trinity on the communion between God and _ourselves_, rather than on the nature of the innertrinitarian life. She pursues the Cappadocian line of thought that the only way to interpret the concept of person is in terms of relationship. Preferring to set aside the metaphysical debate about the ontological constitution of the Trinity _ad intra_, Lucuna bases her thesis on the premise that “God’s way of being in relationship _with us_ – which is God’s personhood – is a perfect expression of God’s being as God … God for us is who God is as God.”

LaCugna’s debt to the insights of John Macmurray and John Zizioulas are evident in her discussion of persons in communion. The purpose of Macmurray’s 1953-54 Gifford Lectures was not only to eradicate the philosophical notion of the solitariness of the ‘thinking self’ by emphasising the self as active agent in the world, but, perhaps more fundamentally, to “show how the personal relations of persons is constitutive of personal existence; that there can be no man until there are at least two men in communication.” In Macmurray’s personalist philosophy the idea of an isolated self is self-contradictory: to argue otherwise is a self-deception from which we need deliverance. More specifically, he argues that the unity of the personal is found “in the community of the ‘You and I’, and since persons are agents, this community is not merely matter of fact, but also matter of intention.” Macmurray proposes three types of disposition which give rise to three modes of morality. The ‘communal’ mode is characteristically heterocentric, existing for the sake of friendship and grounded in love, whereas the ‘contemplative’ and ‘pragmatic’ modes are typically egocentric, existing for the sake of protection and based on fear. Accordingly, Macmurray develops his philosophy of the person as a ‘celebration of communion’, which he succinctly identifies with religion.

Introducing the idea of a universal personal Other, Macmurray acknowledges the idea of God as “a universal Person to whom all particular agents stand in an identical relation.” This emphasis on community and intentionality is central to LaCugna’s trinitarian proposal, as she affirms the necessity for an ethical orientation to the Other (heterocentrism) as the basis for both human and divine action. She extrapolates from Macmurray’s writings a definition of true personhood which emerges only within the context of community, and apart from which persons do not exist at all: “A person is a heterocentric, inclusive, free, relational agent.”

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124 _Ibid_: 211.  
125 _Ibid_: 211.  
126 _Ibid_: 305, author’s italics.  
128 _Ibid_: 27. LaCugna draws obvious parallels with the I-Thou philosophy of the Jewish scholar Martin Buber, for whom true personhood necessarily leads to the realm of I-Thou in opposition to the subject-object duality of I-It: see Buber, Martin, _I and Thou_, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958. I-Thou “entails activity on both sides, in which both parties are free to either disclose themselves or withdraw. Characteristic of such a relationship is the involvement of the total person: at its highest level, I-Thou involves all of me and all of you, intellectually, emotionally, volitionally. Mutuality, liberty and totality are therefore the defining features of I-Thou knowledge.” (Buxton, Graham, _Dancing in the Dark: The Privilege of Participating in the Ministry of Christ_, Carlisle; Paternoster, 2001: 63). Buber’s philosophical treatise also affirmed the personhood of God as the one eternal, unalterable ‘Thou’.  
129 Macmurray argues that “[F]or the contemplative mode, the _real_ world is the spiritual world, and the _real_ life is the spiritual life” (Macmurray, _Persons in Relation_: 123, author’s italics), thus reducing a person to the role of spectator in the world. This interpretation corresponds with his insistence that self can only be properly understood as agent. The pragmatic mode is defined as a competitive mode of morality, in which the goal is “the appropriation of power: and the relation of agents becomes a competition for power” (ibid: 125).  
130 _Ibid_: 162.  
131 _Ibid_: 168-169.  
132 LaCugna, _God For Us_: 259.
Macmurray was neither a theologian nor interested in the doctrine of the Trinity, his philosophical concept of the intentional action of a person-in-relation lies at the very heart of LaCugna’s trinitarian theology. In order to develop her thesis further, LaCugna advances beyond the philosophical insights of Macmurray and draws from contemporary Orthodox theology, specifically the theology of personhood associated with John Zizioulas.  

The fourth-century Cappadocian theologians had earlier attributed relational significance to the term hypostasis; with Zizioulas, LaCugna combines this understanding with the notion of ekstasis, which refers to the process of going out from oneself in a continual move outward. These two ideas of ekstasis and hypostasis integrate in a ‘catholic’ interpretation of personhood. ‘Catholicity’ as it relates to human personhood has to do with being intrinsically and constitutionally oriented towards another, whether spiritually, aesthetically, sexually, mystically or intellectually (so ekstasis), and, secondly, with being totally unique and unrepeatable yet also fully constitutive of what it means to be a human being (hypostasis).

A person is thus not an individual but an open and ecstatic reality, referred to others for his or her existence. The actualization of personhood takes place in self-transcendence, the movement of freedom toward communion with other persons.  

For LaCugna, this interpretation of personhood correlates with God’s own trinitarian being: favouring the term perichoresis as a model of all that it means to be ecstatic, relational, dynamic and vital, she is sympathetic to the metaphor of the ‘divine dance’ as an expression of the essence and unity of God, even if its philological warrant is scant. Just as each human person uniquely exemplifies what it means to be ecstatically human, each divine person exemplifies what it means to be ecstatically divine. This is shown most completely in the economy of salvation, where the “God who is love (Ipse Amore) does not remain locked up in the ‘splendid isolation’ of self-love but spills over into what is other than God, giving birth to creation and history.”  

So God’s life is ‘distributed’ in ecstatic love within a comprehensive plan reaching from creation through to eschatological consummation, one dynamic movement of God, a Patre ad Patrem. LaCugna represents this movement graphically in the form of a parabola, a ‘chiastic model of emanation and return’ that expresses the economy of salvation as the sum total of Christian theology. Thus LaCugna disposes of the need for a static, ahistorical and transeconomic immanent Trinity: “there is only the oikonomiā [Lacugna’s term for the economy of salvation] that is the concrete realization of the mystery of theologia [God in se] in time, space, history, and personality.”

LaCugna’s revision of the basic trinitarian framework precludes the need for two levels in the Trinity, one ad intra and the other ad extra. The doctrine of the Trinity is essentially the grammar of God’s being with us, not God isolated from his creation. So history is internal to the divine life: our life is trinitarian life, and vice versa. God has graciously included us in his ‘divine dance’ of life, and to contemplate whether or not God would be trinitarian apart from the economy of salvation is pure speculation: revelation does not offer us that option. For LaCugna, the doctrine of the Trinity is supremely a practical, not a speculative, doctrine: to participate in the life of God through theosis is the ultimate outworking of Jesus’ words in John 17:20-21, realised through the activity of the Holy Spirit, whom LaCugna identifies as the animating power of the economy, the personal principle of union and communion.

Recognising the social implications of trinitarian theology, LaCugna argues that a theology of the Trinity which allows room for any form of metaphysical statement about the divine life ad intra – even a metaphysics of equality – runs the danger of promoting a political and social order which sanctions potentially oppressive hierarchies. She points out that the original insight of the Cappadocians of a trinitarian interpretation of the monarchy of God (triadike arche instead of mone arche) very soon gave way to the idea that, though the monarchy within God might be a shared one, externally God appears to us as one. This ‘theological defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity’ opened the doors to a confusion between God’s benevolent Fatherhood and all kinds of dominating hierarchies, religious, moral, political and sexual. This concern leads Moltmann, for example, to affirm the concept of perichoresis as the grammar of a kingdom without a monarch, the kingdom of God:

It is only when the doctrine of the Trinity vanquishes the monotheistic notion of the great universal

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133 See, particularly, Zizioulas, Being as Communion. LaCugna appeals not only to philosophical and orthodox theological streams of thought, but also to feminist and liberation theologies, because of her concern that not every configuration of persons-in-relation images God: see LaCugna, God For Us: 266-270.

134 LaCugna, God For Us: 260.

135 Ibid: 270-278.


137 Ibid: 221-224.

138 Ibid: 223.

139 Ibid: 296-300.

140 Ibid: 390-400.
monarch in heaven, and his divine patriarchs in the world, that earthly rulers, dictators and tyrants cease to find any justifying religious archetypes any more.  

LaCugna, however, goes further, arguing that "any theological justification for a hierarchy among persons also vitiates the truth of our salvation through Christ." Her vision of trinitarianism repudiates every conceivable form of subordination among persons: to allow for subordinationism within the life of the Trinity undermines the very basis of the mutuality and ecstasy implicit in the economy of salvation. For LaCugna, the replacement of trinitarian monotheism by a hierarchical theism may be averted by collapsing the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity, so avoiding the very dangers of injustice and oppression experienced throughout history. However, as Grenz observes, her critics fear that "by submerging theologia in oikonomia, she may in fact have lost the freedom of the divine grace, the concern for which motivated theologians such as Barth to retain the language of the immanent in distinction from the economic."  

The Trinity and Creation

This central problem in trinitarian theology of the immanent-transcendent tension, expressed by Gilkey in terms of the connection between the absoluteness and the reciprocal activity of God, is evident in the writings of the theologians cited above. Not only have they wrestled with the problem of "one being, three persons", but they have sought to articulate an understanding of the relationship between the Trinity ad intra and the Trinity ad extra. This necessarily draws the dimensions of time and space into trinitarian theology, specifically God’s relationship with his creation, in which history and eschatology play a central role. The development of trinitarian thinking has therefore taken us beyond what Gunton describes as the Augustinian position, which is preoccupied with the unity of the divine essence and intradivine relations, and which, therefore, “by losing the mediatorship of the Word, at once distances God from the creation and flattens out the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity”, into a strongly relational and dynamic interpretation, embracing not only the internal life of God, but also, critically, the relationship between God and the church, human society and all creation.

The first two concerns – the church and human society – remind us that the doctrine of the Trinity is not to be regarded as an abstract or speculative dogma to be believed, but, as LaCugna insists, living trinitarian faith. It has to do not with theory, but practice, the practice of life as God has it for us. Trinitarian theology is therefore doxological, because “right relationship in every sphere, according to that which God has ordained, everything that brings human persons closer to the communion for which we were made, glorifies God.” Hence, the doctrine of the Trinity pertains to all of life, ecclesial, sacramental, sexual, ethical and spiritual – it is the theological criterion for both orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

God’s relationship with the natural world is likewise the province of trinitarian theology, as Colin Gunton and Thomas Torrance, amongst others, have consistently argued. As the creation of the love of God “the world is not impersonal process, a machine or a self-developing organism – a cosmic collective into which the

141 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: 197. Another theologian who has explored the relationship between the notion of divine monarchy and the reality of oppression in human society is Leonardo Boff, who also adopts the idea of perichoresis as the necessary contour of innertrinitarian life: see Boff, Leonardo, Trinity and Society, Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988.
142 LaCugna, God For Us: 400, author’s italics.
143 Grenz, The Social God and the Relational Self: 57. For a thorough critique of LaCugna’s position, see the excursus in Weinandy, Thomas G., The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995: 123-136. Weinandy castigates LaCugna for her reductionist presentation of the Trinity, insisting that by collapsing the immanent into the economic Trinity we are left without a God ‘in his wholly otherness’. In order for there to be a ‘God-for-us’ there needs to be ‘a’ God, ontologically distinct from all else that exists. Commenting on her emphasis on relationality in the Trinity, Weinandy argues that “while LaCugna maintains the dynamism and even beauty of relational language, the notion of personhood, at least the personhood and subjectivity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is abandoned. They are not divine subjects and therefore all that LaCugna says about our unity and communion with ‘them’ is vacuous.” (Ibid: 133) Essentially, Weinandy is driven by an ontological integrity which demands that we retain a gulf between the God who is in himself and the God who is for us. See also Cunningham, David S., These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998: 37-39.
146 LaCugna, God For Us: 343. For an excellent trinitarian exposition of worship as the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father, linking the doctrine of the Trinity to the pastoral concerns of community life, see Torrance, James B., Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace, Downers Grove: IVP, 1996.
particular simply disappears – but that which itself has a destiny along with the human.”¹⁴⁷ Gunton identifies three trinitarian concepts of which echoes are to be found in recent scientific thought – freedom, relation and divine energies.¹⁴⁸ As we have seen above, these concepts are fundamental to the dynamic relationality implicit in contemporary thinking about the Trinity. Dynamic loving relationships constitute the inner being of God: “God’s being is a being in relation, without remainder relational.”¹⁴⁹ Because these relations are relations of love they are not necessary in themselves and are therefore free. Freedom, or non-necessity, characterises not only the inner life of the Trinity, but also the created world because it is the product of the free creating act of God. For Gunton, this has to do with the action of the Spirit “who is the giver of freedom and the one who enables the created order to be itself: to become what it was created to be.”¹⁵⁰ We see here the outline of a trinitarian theology grounded in a correspondence between relational freedom ad extra and ad intra. God freely relates to his world through what Irenaeus called his ‘two hands’, Son and Spirit: in other words, the God who is free and relational in se acts immanently in creative and redeeming love, investing the created order with the same relational freedom: so the world as a contingent creation “exists in its own way, but is nonetheless dependent for its existence on the activity of the creator.”¹⁵¹

Gunton also postulates correspondence with respect to divine energies, which refer to God’s activities in and towards his creation. The Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky, states that these energies “signify an exterior manifestation of the Trinity which cannot be interiorized, introduced, as it were, within the divine being, as its natural determination.”¹⁵² Gunton views Lossky’s distinction between God’s essence and his energies as problematic, rendering the being of God as static and “essentially unknowable in an epistemologically destructive sense.”¹⁵³ Following Gunton, the whole sweep of salvation history from creation to redemption may therefore be understood in terms of dynamic relational freedom consistent with the inner dynamic of God’s being, exemplified in LaCugna’s chiastic model of emanation and return.

Gunton articulates the historical progression from classical models of a static universe derived from the Aristotelian conception of an ‘unmoved mover’ to contemporary scientific accounts of creation which are predicated on the active role of the Spirit at work in an evolving, indeterminate and ‘open’ universe.¹⁵⁴ Here we are reminded of the pneumatological contributions of Jenson, Moltmann and Pannenberg, whose vision of the Spirit as the eschatological power of God at work within creation is, as discussed above, central to their trinitarian theology. Ultimately, for Gunton, the Spirit is a way of speaking of the personal agency of God towards and in the world; anthropologically a way of speaking of human responsiveness to God and to others; cosmologically a way of speaking of human openness to the world and the world’s openness to human knowledge, action and art.¹⁵⁵

Whilst dynamic relationality is an appropriate term to apply to the operations of the natural world, the concept of freedom is problematic, as Gunton acknowledges. Divine and human life is personal and intrinsically free, but the natural world, though given existence by its creator as the theatricala gloriae Dei (to use Calvin’s phrase), is not. Gunton therefore transmutes the concept of freedom into one of contingency when moving from the personal to the non-personal sphere. As a contingent creation, the universe is an open, incomplete system, exhibiting a freedom that is limited by virtue of its dependence upon the free grace of God as creator. It is contingent in the sense that “it is not self-sufficient or ultimately self-explaining but is given a rationality and

¹⁵⁰ Gunton, The Triune Creator: 86.
¹⁵¹ Gunton, “Relation and Relativity”: 103.
¹⁵³ Gunton, “Relation and Relativity”: 100. Eastern theologians, in contradistinction to their Western counterparts, prefer to understand energies as subsequent to essence, external to the nature of the Trinity (see Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church: 81).
¹⁵⁴ Gunton, “Relation and Relativity”: 100-109. For a fuller discussion of the role of Spirit as the agent of relation in otherness, such that the other is established - and not subverted - in its true reality, see, Gunton, Colin E., The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993: 180-209.
reliability in its orderliness which depend on and reflect God’s own eternal rationality and reliability.”

Thomas Torrance expresses the contingent nature of God’s creation in terms of correspondence, an analogia relationis in which the elusiveness and unpredictability of the natural world is “marvelously coordinated with the transcendent rationality and infinite freedom of its Triune Creator.”

The distinction between God and his creation is underscored by Torrance in his understanding of the unlimited freedom that characterises the being of the triune God, and the limited yet authentic freedom given to the whole universe. He cites approvingly the distinction made by Athanasius between the ontological dimension in God as Father and the cosmological dimension in God as Creator, arguing that God is always Father, but he is not always Creator: accordingly, “the creation of the world out of nothing is something new even for God. God was always Father, but he became Creator.”

The new, decisive acts of God in creation, incarnation and Pentecost are indicative of the absolute and unlimited freedom of God to be other than he always has been. In ecstatic and generous love, God is neither the ‘unmoved mover’ of classical Aristotelian theology, nor the ‘moved unmover’ of process theology, but the Self-moved Creator who is ever open to his creation. His immutability is expressed in terms of his freedom to love, not by virtue of the static, abstract attributes implicit in classical theism. For Torrance, God is immutable because of his constancy as the ever self-living and ever self-moving Being. In ecstatic love he graces his creation with a reality and freedom of its own, authentic yet contingent upon God’s own unlimited freedom.

That authenticity is guaranteed by the activity of the Holy Spirit whereby creation is “creatively upheld and sustained in its existence beyond its own power in an open-ended relation toward God in whom its true end and purpose as creature are lodged.”

The Spirit is therefore the eschatological ‘perfecting’ Spirit who holds the whole created order – animate and inanimate, human and non-human, personal and non-personal – in the freedom of divine love. Indeed, he is not only sustainer, but also, in a dynamic sense, the energising agent in what Gunton calls the ‘forward movement of the cosmos’: he is “the divine energy releasing the energies of the world, enabling the world to realize its dynamic relatedness.”

At times Torrance and Gunton employ the language of perichoresis as a helpful concept in their discussion of the dynamic interrelatedness of the cosmos. In his elaboration of the doctrine of God as Sovereign Creator, Torrance pursues the idea of the ‘dynamic three-way reciprocity’ between Father, Son and Spirit in what he calls “the perichoretic coactivity of the Holy Trinity.” Gunton suggests that the character of the universe may be expressed as a “perichoresis of interrelated systems.” These intimations of a cosmic perichoresis will be explored more fully in Chapter 5. Here we note that it is precisely because God embraces creation’s “frail contingent reality within the everlasting power of his divine presence” that we should expect trinitarian theology to offer a cogent analogia relationis between the creator and his creation. God’s own ecstatic perichoretic life finds expression in the creation that he has brought into being, the creation that he unchangeably and unconditionally loves and blesses. Creation is open precisely because God himself is open; it is free – in the contingent sense – precisely because God is free; alive and surprising because God is inexhaustibly living and creative in his inner being. The dynamic perichoretic freedom of the triune God overlaps and intersects with the contingent freedom of the cosmos in such a way as to “give rise to refined and subtle patterns of order in the on-going spatio-temporal universe which we cannot anticipate but which constantly takes us by surprise.”

The notion of a cosmic perichoresis implicit in the writings of recent trinitarian theologians, and articulated more precisely in Colin Gunton’s 1992 Bampton Lectures, represents the culmination of more than half a century of trinitarian reflection and debate since Karl Barth re-opened the door in his biblically-based presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity. As indicated earlier, Barth’s understanding of perichoresis was conspicuously static and therefore limited in its contribution to a full appreciation of God’s relational involvement with his creation. No doubt this was in large part due to his rather abstract ‘revelation model’ of the Trinity which allowed little room for the dynamically interactive interpretations favoured by later theologians.

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157 Ibid: 222.
158 Ibid: 208, author’s italics.
159 The term ‘Moved Unmover’ is an expression that Torrance attributes to Colin Gunton (ibid: 239, fn. 16).
163 Ibid: 106.
164 Ibid: 218.
165 Ibid: 222.
166 Published under the title The One, the Three and the Many: see especially pp. 155-179, in which Gunton proposes a theology of relatedness, presenting the concept of perichoresis as a helpful way to map the eternal dynamic of deity.
Having already introduced the concept of *perichoresis* at various points in this chapter, it would be helpful at this stage to trace the origins, development and interpretations of the concept since it was first introduced in the literature of the early church Fathers.

**The Doctrine of Perichoresis**

The term *perichoresis*, though implicit in the theological formulations of the Cappadocian Fathers, who needed to defend themselves against charges of tritheism, was neither specifically identified nor clarified theologically as a trinitarian concept until a few centuries later, when tritheism became a major problem in the life of the church. Prestige cautions us against minimising the dependence of the Cappadocians on the insights of Athanasius, whose understanding of the co-inherence of the three persons led him to remark that the Son is omnipresent, because he is in the Father, and the Father is in Him; the case is different with creatures, which are only to be found in separate determinate localities; but the Spirit who fills all things clearly is exempt from such limitation, and must therefore be God, and is in the Son as the Son is in the Father.

Athanasius’ reference to ‘creatures’ is important: arguing that *perichoresis* refers to the reciprocal *interiority* of the divine persons, Miroslav Volf rightly observes that, in a strict sense, “there can be no correspondence to the interiority of the divine persons at a human level. Another human self cannot be internal to my own self as subject of action. Human persons are always external to one another as *subjects.*”

So the indwelling of other persons is an exclusive prerogative of God. However, we might maintain, with Volf, that *perichoresis* is constructive at the ecclesial level with respect to the *interiority of personal characteristics.*

Athanasius’ primary concern, however, was not so much trinitarian as christological in his opposition to the Arian insistence that Christ was a created being, thus denying the co-inherence of two natures, divine and human. Beyond this early christological appropriation of the word, the richness of the term *perichoresis* may be appreciated when we consider that, throughout the history of Christian thought, it “provides a way of attempting to express how unity and distinction are combined in the Trinity, in the incarnate Logos and in creation as reunited with God.”

In the fourth century Gregory of Nazianzus employed the Greek verb *perichoreo* to refer to the process whereby life and death, though they appear to differ greatly from one another, “yet ‘reciprocate’ and resolve themselves into one another.” In his first letter to Cledonius the Presbyter, Gregory gives christological significance to the verb. Referring to the two natures of Christ, he writes: “Just as the natures are blended so too are the titles which mutually transfer by the principle of their natural togetherness.” Whether Gregory was referring to the static notion of ‘coherence’, or mutual indwelling, or the more dynamic process of interpenetration, is open to question.

The noun *perichoresis* was not technically in circulation until much later. Maximus Confessor, the seventh-century Greek theologian and monk from Constantinople, drew from Gregory’s christological use of *perichoresis* and ascribed to it dynamic rather than static significance, so that “it was used to portray the reciprocity and

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170 The idea of *perichoresis* in the context of human sociality – i.e. as an *anthropological* metaphor – is developed further later in this section, and more fully in Chapter 4.


174 For a discussion of Prestige’s preference for *perichoreo* to mean ‘to reciprocate’ or ‘to interchange’ rather than ‘to interpenetrate’, see *ibid*: 53-57. Harrison prefers to ascribe a more dynamic and energetic understanding of *perichoreo* to Gregory, anticipating the exchange of names, titles, activities and attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*) in the later vocabulary of Maximus Confessor and John of Damascus. On the word ‘coherence’, Gunton notes its Latin origin, which is static in meaning rather than dynamic, preferring the Greek term *perichoresis* as the more satisfactory of the two terms. In his discussion of the static and dynamic nuances in the term *perichoresis*, Baxter Kruger maintains that both are “eternally true in God. The ‘static’ perichoretic mutual indwelling of the Father, Son and Spirit is the ontological reality of God, and it is an ontological reality which eternally and dynamically expresses itself in an unspeakable fellowship of love. Both the fact of perichoresis and its living expression in the love of the Father, Son and Spirit are eternally true in the being of God.” (Kruger, C. Baxter, *Recovering the Trinity and Perichoresis and Their Significance for the 3rd Christian Millennium*, Adelaide; unpublished Perichoresis Lectures 2002: 63).
exchange of the divine and human actions in the one person of Christ.”

Thunberg argues that Maximus was the first Christian writer to give to the term perichoresis a central position within orthodox Christology, and it is of more than passing interest that Maximus attributed anthropological and cosmological significance to the concept, to the extent that the idea of coherience was, for him, a characteristic of every level of reality – human, divine and cosmic. The idea of theosis, or participation in the divine, is implicit in Maximus’ theology, embracing a soteriological interpenetration of the believer with the object of belief. At the cosmological level, Maximus proposed the idea that perichoretic coherience was built into the structure of the created natural world, a proposition which has gained currency in the dynamic relationality of such contemporary trinitarian theologians as Pannenberg, Moltmann, Torrance and Gunton.

Trinitarian – as distinct from christological – application of the perichoresis concept has its origin in Pseudo-Cyril in the sixth century, though it was developed more thoroughly and consistently by John of Damascus in De fide orthodoxa. Translation from the Greek into Latin generated two meanings, static and active. Circuminsessio derived from the Latin circum-in-sedere, meaning to sit around, and was therefore appropriated by those who preferred to adopt a more passive interpretation of trinitarian relatedness, such as Thomas Aquinas. Others opted for the Latin circumincessio, derived from circum-incedere, which means to move around, a state of doing rather than a state of being.

A number of analogies have been suggested to convey the mutuality and interdependence implicit in the notion of perichoresis, such as the light of lamps which permeate one another in undifferentiated light, perfume sprayed into the air, or the three dimensionality of physical objects. However, as LaCugna points out, these analogies “do not convey the dynamic and creative energy, the eternal and perpetual movement, the mutual and reciprocal permeation of each person with and in and through and by the other persons.” They are also impersonal, which is why she supports the image of the ‘divine dance’ as an effective metaphor and, moreover, an intriguing and suggestive play on words: the Greek perichoreuo, meaning to ‘dance around’ (derived from the word choreia, or ‘dance’), closely resembles perichoreo, which means to ‘encircle’ or ‘encapsulate’.

For Fiddes, the image of the divine dance is “not so much about dancers as about the patterns of the dance itself, an interweaving of ecstatic movements.” This reflects his conviction that it makes “perfectly good grammatical sense to speak of a perichoresis of movements, though the theological tradition has referred to a perichoresis of divine subjects.” However, Fiddes’ emphasis on relations, and the dynamic activity which underlies the diversity of divine actions, could be interpreted as a diminution of distinct hypostatic identity, a danger of which he is aware. The possibility of collapsing persons into relations parallels Gunton’s concern – at the levels of human, cosmic and divine reality – to reinforce the particularity of the one against the plurality of the many.

For Gunton, ontology and relation are not opposites, but complementary: they stand or fall together. People and things, like God, have substantiality, particularity and distinctiveness “by virtue of and not in face of their relationality to the other.” Perichoresis is therefore the foe and not the agent of homogeneity. Because uniqueness is as much the object of God’s loving concern as oneness, the Spirit – whose distinctive mode of action, for Gunton, is perhaps the constitution of particularity even as the Son is the one in whom all things hold together – gives shape to all that exists, directing each person and thing until it reaches ultimate eschatological perfection.

In their discussion of the inner life of the Trinity, both Volf and Thomas Torrance share Gunton’s disquiet with regard to any implied separation between ontology and relation. Volf’s specific concern is ecclesial: to emphasise relations at the expense of persons not only runs the risk of persons being absorbed into one undifferentiated ‘substance’, but jeopardises the notion of ‘personal rights’, which may result in sanctioning the


177 LaCugna, God For Us: 271.

178 Fiddes, Participating in God: 72.

179 Ibid: 73.

180 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, especially Chapters 2 and 7, in which the author laments the homogeneity characteristic of Western culture, representing what Václav Havel describes as ‘a mirror image’ of the repressive ideologies of communist East Europe. Gunton’s book is an attempt to reinstate the necessity for distinctiveness and particularity in society, without degenerating into individualism; he claims that “almost everywhere there operates a strong Platonist drive to turn particularities into abstractions, variety into homogeneity.” (Ibid: 44).

181 Ibid: 194, author’s italics.

182 See Torrance, The Christian Doctrine of God: 194ff., where the author understands the concept of perichoresis “as essentially active in its basic significance without any split in its wholeness between ontological and dynamic aspects”; and Volf: “The constitution of the persons and their relations are, of course, not to be conceived as two temporally sequential steps, but rather as two dimensions of the eternal life of the triune God” (Volf, After Our Likeness: 216-217).
abuse of power within a hierarchical structure of relationships. In his preference for the more ‘participatory’ language of relations rather than the ‘observational’ language of persons, Fiddes gets round this problem by transmuting Pannenberg’s three ‘living realizations of separate centres of action’ into “three living realisations of movements or directions of action”, arguing that these can equally be conceived as distinguishing themselves from each other. In this way, Fiddes maintains hypostatic distinctiveness, which is essentially a particularity of action by which the divine persons are reckoned distinct from each other.\(^{183}\) This perspective is consistent with his view that God is ‘an event of relationships’, a ‘perichoresis of movements’, into which human beings are drawn as active participants, and not just observers.

In the revised text of a sermon preached in Great St Mary’s, Cambridge, in 1985, Bishop Kallistos Ware refers to the perichoretic coinherence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as “an unceasing movement of mutual love – the ‘round dance’ of the Trinity.”\(^{184}\) The feminist theologian Patricia Wilson-Kastner adopts the ‘round dance’ metaphor, but, as LaCugna has shown, her re-interpretation of perichoresis as perichoreusis, though commendable, is methodologically suspect: she places her model of the trine God within the intradivine life rather than locating it in the economy of salvation. Only the latter context, for LaCugna, is adequate to convey the dynamic choreography of the divine dance, in which human beings are drawn in as beloved partners (John 17:20-21).\(^{185}\)

Moltmann, too, embraces the language of dancing in his understanding of perichoretic life. One evening he was reading a passage from Augustine’s Confessions which led him to respond with an eagerness to participate in what he calls an ‘unconditional Yes to life’:

> When I love God I love the beauty of bodies, the rhythm of movements, the shining of eyes, the feelings, the scents, the sounds of all this protean creation. When I love you, my God, I want to embrace it all for I love you with all my senses in the creations of your love.\(^{186}\)

The circulatory character of dance – expressed as a “fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching”\(^{187}\) – is what it means for God to be intensely alive and vibrantly active in the eternity of his love. Trinitarian perichoresis, in which Father, Son and Spirit are united precisely because of their engagement in mutual, reciprocal and dynamic self-giving love, is, for Moltmann, a process of most perfect and intense empathy\(^{188}\); it is a process whereby unity within the divine life derives intrinsically from its own inner circulation.

Though perichoresis has a valid ontological interpretation in the notion of coinherence, in the sense that the three persons of the Trinity coinhere in being as well as in act, the understanding depicted in the preceding paragraphs is inherently dynamic and relational. There is a three-way reciprocity which is so profound, so ineffable, that the Western ‘doctrine of appropriation’, which conveys the idea that each person of the Trinity is assigned particular attributes appropriate to his being, falls completely away as an idea that is both otiose and damaging to the intrinsic truth of Christ who, as the Word and only begotten Son of God, constitutes the one revelation of the Father and the one way by which we can go to the Father.\(^{189}\)

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\(^{183}\) Fiddes, Participating in God: 81ff.


\(^{185}\) LaCugna, God For Us: 272-275. See also Wilson-Kastner, Patricia, Faith, Feminism and the Christ, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.


\(^{187}\) LaCugna, God For Us: 272.

\(^{188}\) Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: 175. So Torrance: “Since God is Spirit, we must understand the περιχώρησις between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit within the One Being of God in a wholly spiritual and intensely personal way, not in a static, but in a dynamic yet ontological way, as the eternal movement of Communion which the Triune God ever is within himself and in his active relations toward us through the Holy Spirit.” Like Moltmann and LaCugna, Torrance interprets this communion ad intra as a dynamic reality between the three divine persons “in which their differentiating properties instead of separating them actually serve their oneness with one another.” (Torrance, Thomas F. Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994: 141).

\(^{189}\) Torrance, The Christian Doctrine of God: 200, author’s italics. See also Athanasius, Ad Serapionem, 1.28 and 30-31, where the early church theologian advances the idea that “the Father does all things through the Word and in the Spirit.” However, Torrance acknowledges that “In every creative and redemptive act the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit operate together in fellowship with one another but nevertheless in ways peculiar to each of them. It is not possible for us to spell that out in terms of any demarcations between their distinctive operations, if only because within the coactivity of the three divine Persons those operations perichoretically contain one another and pass over into one another while remaining what they distinctively are in themselves.” (Torrance, The Christian Doctrine of God: 198).
For Torrance, all of God’s acts have behind them the full weight of the Trinity whilst simultaneously each person of the Trinity retains his own distinct identity: this interpretation of the concept of perichoresis implies that the doctrine of appropriation need not have arisen at all as a response to the Augustinian bias towards the one divine essence as the starting place for an understanding of God.

For the Catholic theologian Thomas Weinandy, who essays a strictly ontological ‘reconception’ of the Trinity, this “perichoresis of action on the part of all three persons completely revolutionizes the perichoresis of the East and the circumincession of the West.”190 Whilst his focus is on the Trinity ad intra, Weinandy claims to have recovered what he describes as ‘an unprecedented dynamism’ within the perichoretic divine life by attributing activity to all three persons of the Trinity in spiration and begetting. Noticeably, the Spirit is conceived as the one who makes this mutual coinherence of action possible and intelligible, a view which contradicts the strict linearity – and hierarchy – implicit in the Orthodox understanding of the monarchy of the Father, from whom both Son and Spirit proceed.191 The reciprocal interaction between Father, Son and Spirit proposed by Weinandy replaces this linearity with a symmetrical coinherence which simultaneously negates the passivity of the Augustinian presentation of the Spirit as impersonal ‘bond of love’. Despite Weinandy’s limited ad intra ontological orientation, his trinitarian reconception accommodates a helpful re-evaluation of the role of the Spirit in active perichoresis.

The notion of triangularity as a necessary presupposition of triune love ad intra was explored by Richard of St. Victor in the twelfth century. In his De Trinitate he argues that genuine love needs to be not only mutual but shared, if it is to exist in all its fullness. This requires a third person: “Shared love is properly said to exist when a third person is loved by two persons harmoniously and in community, and the affection of the two persons is fused into one affection by the flame of love for a third.”192 For Richard, this third person in the case of God was the Holy Spirit, the condilectus or ‘co-beloved’. More recently, David Miller has suggested the need for a ménage à trois in matters of ultimate love, both divine and human, maintaining that a ‘threatening fantasy lurks in the trinitarian image: the necessity of the third in love.’193 His approach follows that of Augustine’s search for vestigia trinitatis within human nature, together with his notion of the lover, the beloved and the love that unites the two. Though he was not attempting to derive an insight into the nature of the Trinity from the concept of love, Miller’s analogical methodology cannot take us very far in our understanding of trinitarian interrelatedness. Pannenberg rightly points out that, in order to find a basis for the doctrine of the Trinity “we must begin with the way in which Father, Son, and Spirit come on the scene and relate to one another in the event of revelation.”194

This event of revelation is, as Moltmann and others have demonstrated most forcefully, summed up in the cross: “The cross stands at the heart of the trinitarian being of God: it divides and conjoins the persons in their relationships to each other and portrays them in a specific way.”195 The perichoretic love that resides within the divine life is at the same time both ecstatic and sacrificial. This most central of all interpretations of perichoretic love life is expressed powerfully in Andrei Rublev’s fifteenth-century icon representing the visit of the three angels to Abraham (Genesis 18).196 The icon portrays the three angels in a circular pattern, suggestive of the ‘round dance’ or perichoresis of the Trinity. The three figures, with head inclined, are turned towards each other, as if in dialogue. The circle is not closed but open, indicative of the ecstatic love of the Trinity, a love that, in sovereign divine freedom, creates the world. In Rublev’s icon, the three angels each point towards a chalice that is positioned in the centre of a cube-shaped table, resembling an altar, on which they are seated; in this chalice there is the head of an animal. The Genesis 18 story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is the foil for

190 Weinandy, The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: 79, author’s italics. Weinandy’s ‘reconception’ of the Trinity is based on the thesis is that “if we, who are Christians, are conformed into sons of the Father by the Spirit through whom we are empowered to cry out in the same words as Jesus, then the eternal Son himself must have been begotten and conformed to be Son in the same Spirit in whom he eternally cries out ‘Abba!’” (Ibid: ix-x).
191 In this regard, Weinandy’s discussion centres on the ecumenical obstacle of the filioque controversy.
193 Miller, David L., Three Faces of God: Traces of the Trinity in Literature and Life, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986: 44, author’s italics. Miller’s thesis is not very convincing: in his desire to press his point that ‘every dyad turns out to be a triad’ (after the contemporary theologian Tom Driver) he tends towards impersonality in some of his examples.
194 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, Vol. I: 299, my italics. Drawing from the biblical statement that God is love (1 John 4:8), Pannenberg points out that “[e]ven if we presuppose a plurality of persons in a relationship of love, the persons are related to one another by something else, i.e. love, which is not itself thought of as a third, as the third person.” (Ibid: 297).
196 The insights that follow are drawn from +Kallistos of Diokleia, “The human person as an icon of the Trinity”: 18-20, in which the author refers to Evdokimov, Paul, L’Orthodoxie, Neuchâtel/Paris, 1959: 233-238.
the greater story of the triune God’s self-sacrificing love, and so we are invited to ponder the deeper meaning of Rublev’s icon:

It tells us that the mutual, outgoing love of the Trinity, expressed in the creation of the human person, is at the same time a sacrificial love. In total solidarity with the world, God the Trinity takes responsibility for all the consequences of the act of creation.¹⁹⁷

This is the language of *kenosis*, of suffering and ecstatic love, expressed in terms of trinitarian *perichoresis*.

Taking a pneumatological perspective on *kenosis*, a doctrine which was originally conceived christologically, Moltmann argues that the Spirit who accompanies Jesus throughout his life and in his passion, and who is therefore his *companion* in suffering, is the Spirit of condescension who experiences progressive *kenosis*.¹⁹⁸ In defence of ‘Spirit Christology’, Clark Pinnock writes about the Spirit as the one who “prepares, constitutes and communicates the mystery of the incarnation.” Ultimately, the Son’s death and resurrection “is a trinitarian event in which the three Persons experience the mutuality and reciprocity characteristic of the triune God.”¹⁹⁹ The cross is therefore an intratrinitarian drama, a dynamic *perichoresis* of suffering love for the sake of the whole world, an event in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all intimately, necessarily, *perichoretically* involved: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

*Perichoresis and the Nature of Reality*

Earlier we noted Moltmann’s theology of the Spirit as ‘the power of futurity’ acting in dynamic perichoretic power, embodying an eschatological vision of hope for the whole of creation. Seeking a perichoretic understanding of the relation of God to creation, he exeges Acts 17:28 – “In him we live, move and have our being” – in terms of a panentheistic coexistence of ‘God in creation’ and ‘creation in God’:

Always to stress only the distinction between God and the world and God’s transcendence over the world in the doctrine of creation is to adopt a one-sided approach and a theology of secularization imitating the secularizing of the world.²⁰⁰

In a tribute to the sixteenth-century philosopher and scholar, Giordano Bruno, who was burnt alive for heresy, Moltmann hails him as a prophet of our times, “the herald of a ‘new paradigm’ for a world in which human beings can survive in organic harmony with the Spirit of the universe.”²⁰¹ Eschewing the mechanistic universe of Galileo and Newton, Moltmann endorses Bruno’s embrace of the old Stoic doctrine of the world-soul which gives all things life and movement in the divine dynamic of the universe.

Moltmann’s implicit use of the language of *perichoresis* in his vision of a creation which is moving under the impulse of the Spirit towards its eschatological consummation, is made explicit by Gunton in his discussion of the concept as a dynamism of relatedness at all levels of reality. Seeking a postmodern response to the failure of modernity – manifested in the fragmentation of culture, destructive individualism, naturalistic philosophies and the deification of meaninglessness – he articulates the concept of *perichoresis* as an appropriate construct for

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¹⁹⁹ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*: 92–93. Pinnock cautions against a liberal interpretation of the phrase ‘Spirit Christology’ where Spirit is used to refer to the divine element in Jesus rather than trinitarian person. His use of the term preserves trinitarian distinctives in order to emphasise the perichoretic role of the Spirit in the economy of salvation.

²⁰⁰ Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*: 133. Anticipating possible confusion between pantheism and panentheism, Moltmann points out that his pneumatological doctrine of creation is predicated on the assertion that the Spirit lives in eternal perichoretic unity with the Son and the Father, and therefore “there cannot be a dissolution of God in the world, as theologians fear, nor the divinization of evolution which some new age scientists (E. Jantsch, F. Capra) want.” (Ibid: 133).

interpreting human existence in God’s creation. The dynamism of mutual constitutiveness derives from the world’s being a dynamic order that is summoned into being and directed towards its perfection by the free creativity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Gunton therefore advocates a perspective on the world that is ultimately perichoretic in that everything in creation contributes in some way to the being of everything else. To speak thus is to acknowledge movement, recurrence and interpenetration as defining characteristics of a creation which reflects, within the constraints of an admittedly human rational construct, the nature of its Creator, as Paul declares in Romans 1:20. Gunton’s proposal may therefore be viewed as an attempt to integrate all levels of reality – divine, human and cosmic – within the construct of perichoresis in order to offer a more coherent paradigm conspicuously absent in modernity.

Earlier, we noted Volf’s suggestion that the idea of perichoresis has ecclesial relevance; in other words, at the human level there is a similarity between the unity of the church and the unity of the triune God. It is the Spirit of God who makes this unity a concrete reality within the life of the local church:

Each person gives of himself or herself to others, and each person in a unique way takes up others into himself or herself. This is the process of the mutual internalization of personal characteristics occurring in the church through the Holy Spirit indwelling Christians. The Spirit opens them to one another and allows them to become catholic persons in their uniqueness. It is here that they, in a creatively way, correspond to the catholicity of the divine persons.

However, when perichoresis is applied to the Christian community of faith, it is important to recognise that human beings are not interior to the Spirit in the same way that the Spirit is interior to human beings. Volf insists that personal interiority is one-sided. Human beings participate in the perichoretic life of God in a distinctively different way to that which reflects the interiority of trinitarian divine life: the Spirit indwells human persons, but humans do not indwell the person of the Spirit in the same way that the Father and Son indwell him in divine perichoresis. We might note here LaCugna’s rejection of a divine perichoresis which is distinct from a human perichoresis: consistent with her vision to focus the doctrine of the Trinity on the communion between God and ourselves, rather than on the nature of the innertrinitarian life, she insists – contra Volf – that there is only one perichoresis, implicit in Jesus’ high-priestly prayer in John 17:20-21. LaCugna critiques the methodology of the feminist theologian, Patricia Wilson-Kastner, who seeks to model the equality of human persons on trinitarian perichoresis, with its characteristics of inclusiveness, community and freedom. LaCugna prefers to ground her vision of egalitarian human community in the economy of salvation and “the revelation of the concrete forms of human community proclaimed by Jesus as characteristic of the reign of God.”

What is clear, irrespective of the precise nature of the theological correspondence between divine and human perichoresis contemplated by LaCugna, Volf, Fiddes, Gunton and others, is that the mutuality and reciprocity implicit in the intradivine life is, for all of them, normative as the ontological ground for all human interactions. And because all human beings are caught up with one another in the complex reality of our total environment, what Gunton picturesquely calls the “bundle of life,” then it is appropriate to apply the perichoretic analogy inclusively rather than exclusively: it is not to be confined to the Christian community, but is relevant for all

Footnotes:
202 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many: 163-179. Recognising that the orientation of being is distorted and delayed – but not removed – by sin and evil, Gunton invokes the incarnation and the redeeming agency of the Spirit as the means by which all things return to perfection.
203 Ibid: 166.
204 Romans 1:20: ‘For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.’
205 Volf’s exegesis of John 17:21 leads him to resist the idea that human perichoretic unity is identical to divine perichoretic unity: “It is not the mutual perichoresis of human beings, but rather the indwelling of the Spirit common to everyone that makes the church into a communion corresponding to the Trinity, a communion in which personhood and sociality are equiprimal.” (Volf, After Our Likeness: 213).
206 Ibid: 211-212, author’s italics. Volf’s understanding of catholicity has personal, ecclesial and interecclesial application: “Just as every church is a catholic church because the whole Christ is present in it through the Holy Spirit, so also is every believer a catholic person because the whole Christ indwells everyone through the Holy Spirit.” (Ibid: 279). The interecclesial relevance of the perichoresis of the divine persons is revealed as local churches, absorbing the unique identifying characteristics of their local context, transmit these characteristics to other churches. “By opening up to one another both diachronically and synchronically, local churches should enrich one another, thereby increasingly becoming catholic churches.” (Ibid: 213).
207 Ibid: 211.
208 LaCugna, God For Us: 274.
209 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many: 170.
human beings.

Furthermore, the richness of the language of perichoresis with respect to human community lies not only in the mutuality and reciprocity of giving and receiving, but also in its insistence that particularity is not diminished, but rather enhanced.210 So, as Gunton argues consistently, the concept enables ‘the one and the many’ in dynamic interrelations to be sustained without loss to either the particularity of the one or the plurality of the many. In short, it offers us a window into both our understanding of God as triune being, unitas in trinitate and trinitas in unitate, and also our own self-understanding as unique creatures who have been created to live in communal solidarity in his world.

We might now ask, with Gunton, “Is it right to speak of perichoresis in the impersonal world also?”211 Already, we have noted hints at a cosmic perichoresis in the writings of a number of contemporary theologians, and, as we shall see in Chapter 5, which is devoted to the examination of perichoresis as a principle of cosmological unity, modern physics offers a persuasive argument in favour of the proposition that the universe created by God is perichoretic in character. Commenting on the orderliness and complex reproductive genius discernible in creation, Pinnock maintains that a “power of creativity is at work in the universe, which can be viewed as a createurely perichoresis of dynamic systems echoing the trinitarian mystery.”212 Advances in science invite us to view the universe as a system of interrelated parts, in which the behaviour of the whole is more significant than detailed examination of the fragments that constitute the system.

It is this insight which Giuseppe Del Re, an Italian theoretical chemist, translates into the cosmological metaphor of the ‘Great Dance’, reflecting the instinctive human longing for a model of coherence that holds everything together.213 In his foreword to Del Re’s book, Thomas Torrance observes that the author uses the ‘Great Dance Image’

to give meaningful expression to the dynamical order of the universe as a coherent, evolving pattern in which all things participate as if in a dance or a ballet, combining general harmony and coherence with evolution, randomness, irreversibility.214

The notion of contingency which we identified in the writings of both Gunton and Torrance reflects the freedom and openness implicit in the dance metaphor embraced by Del Re. In Greek thought as well as in early Christian reflection, dance was a widespread image for the participation of all created beings in God.215 Before its appearance in recent scientific thinking, motivated in part by the search for a coherent Weltanschauung – or overall cosmic perspective – the metaphor of dance can be traced back to Platonic and medieval interpretations of the meaning and purpose of life. Plotinus, the third-century Neoplatonist moral and religious teacher, sustains the cosmic dance image in his description of the vitality of the stars in the universe, employing at times the language of ‘dance-play’: so

we may take the comparison of the movement of the heavenly bodies to a choral dance; if we think of it as a dance which comes to rest at some given period, the entire dance, accomplished from beginning to end, will be perfect while at each partial stage it was imperfect: but if the dance is a thing of eternity, it is in eternal perfection. 216

Plotinus’ reference to rest, alongside his allusion to eternal perfection, seems to reflect here the Platonic idea of God as the still, unmoving and perfect centre of the dance. Fiddes suggests that perhaps the image of the dance as a metaphor for the inner participation of the triune God did not take hold of the Christian imagination precisely because the notion of God as a motionless or immoveable deity, as portrayed in conventional thinking, did not sit well with the ecstasy and dynamism implicit in the vocabulary of choreography.217 But with the

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210 The sociologist Clifford Geertz emphasises the particular in our dealings with one another: “We must, in short, descend into detail, past the misleading tags, past the metaphysical types, past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the essential character of not only the various cultures but the various sorts of individuals within each culture, if we wish to encounter humanity face to face.” (Geertz, Clifford C., The Interpretation of Cultures, New York: Basic Books, 1973: 53).
211 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many: 171.
212 Pinnock, Flame of Love: 67.
214 Ibid: x.
215 Fiddes, Participating in God: 73, where the author refers to the ‘never-ending dance’ of the angels around the throne of God, and the ‘hierarchy of dancing celestial choirs’ envisaged by the Neoplatonist Denys the Areopagite.
216 Plotinus, Enneads (Fourth Ennead, Fourth Tractate), 4.4.8; see also 4.4.33.
217 Fiddes, Participating in God: 74. Stillness at the centre of some form of cosmic dance is implicit in the thought of the twentieth-century poet T. S Eliot: “At the still point of the turning world … there the dance is … Except for the point, the
recovery of an understanding of trinitarian life that emphasises dynamic relationality and mutual reciprocity in the place of Thomist notions of immutability and impassibility, the language of dance is now theologically permissible. It has captured the imagination not only of theologians intent on restoring the Trinity to its rightful place at the center of Christian life and doctrine, but also of a number of scientists who espouse a vision of the universe as a dynamic cosmic theatre displaying the harmony and coherence characteristic of the dance metaphor.

Without detracting in any way from the Barthian insistence on revelation, specifically God’s self-revelation in the historical person of Jesus Christ in the economy of salvation, as the bedrock of trinitarian discourse, ‘Trinity talk’ has broadened over the last half-century to incorporate insights ranging from the philosophical anthropology of John Macmurray to the cosmological theories of those who are working at the cutting edge of the science-theology interface. This chapter has traced the significant theological movements from a revelation-based but relatively static interpretation of the Trinity to one that is characterised by a dynamic eschatologically-oriented perichoresis. In the process, the notion of perichoresis has been presented as an appropriate integrative construct at the levels of divine, human/social and cosmic reality, a construct which highlights the activity of the Spirit as the eschatological power of God at work in all creation, enabling all that exists – personal and non-personal – to fully and finally become itself in the freedom of divine love. So the Holy Spirit may be understood as “the power that transcends and operates within nature, guiding it to its destiny,”218 and “the ecstasy of divine life, the overabundance of joy, that gives birth to the universe and ever works to bring about a fullness of unity.”219 It remains to spell out more specifically in the next two chapters the contours of perichoresis as a pneumatologically-oriented dialogical construct at the level of pastoral practice and as a principle of cosmological unity, before proposing how these insights might be synthesised into a model of pastoral and scientific coherence.

218 Pinnock, Flame of Love: 67.