Theology: An Economic Doctrine of the Trinity?

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Theology has evolved much since I first began studying it, in the fall of 1954—exactly fifty years ago. All of those whose writings we then studied under the rubric of "contemporary theology" are now dead. The impact of some of them, particularly Karl Barth, may still be felt; but even the most traditional Barthians of today are in reality post-Barthians, asking questions and dealing with subjects that our mentor would never have imagined.

It is not only the names of the theologians that have changed, but also their faces, their gender, the color of their skin, and the accent of their speech. When I first began studying theology in Cuba, several of our professors spoke with an English accent. And those who did not, had studied in the United States or in Europe, and were modeling our studies and their content after the fashion of what was then done in those lands. Today, there are vast numbers of people teaching theology in the United States and in Europe with Spanish or Korean surnames, and with Spanish, Korean, or Indian accents. Today, seminary curricula in this country are being reshaped on the basis of observations and experiences from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

When I first studied theology, and for the next twenty years, all our textbooks were either in English or translations into Spanish from English or German. Today, a number of the textbooks employed by seminary students in this country are translated from Spanish.

In a way, this change in the complexion of theological faculties is a reflection of a radical change in the composition of the Christian church. Just to mention one piece of statistics, while in 1900 more than four out of five Christians were white, a hundred years later, in 2000, that number had been reduced to less than two in five. The centers of vitality for the Christian church have shifted southward, and we are now in a situation in which Christian communities that until a few years ago were basically receiving communities have now become active participants in the mission of the church. And they have also become active participants in the theological enterprise of the church.

The change in the complexion of theologians, and in the circumstances in which they do theology, has also brought about a change in the content itself of theology. Or, perhaps more

exactly, they have brought about a change in the questions asked by theologians, and also by historians of theology such as myself. And because the questions have changed, the answers have also changed. When I first studied Patristics, we knew—or thought we knew—what sort of questions to ask of the texts we studied.

Let me give a specific example. Early in the second century, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, was taken to Rome to suffer martyrdom. Along the way, he wrote seven letters that stand as one of the earliest and most beautiful witnesses to the faith of the early church. Back in the fifties, when we studied his letters, trying to discover as much as possible of that faith and that early church, we asked questions such as: What does Ignatius have to say about the incarnation? What does he say about the Eucharist? Who are the heretics that he attacks so strongly? What did they teach about Jesus, about the church, about the bishops? How does the Christianity of Ignatius relate to the mystery religions that were so popular at the time? And, because we asked those questions, we learned much about Ignatius' views on the incarnation, on the Eucharist, on the church, and on bishops. Now, however, I reread those letters that I almost know by heart and note things I did not see then. Thus, in his letter to Smyrna he tells them

how they are to know that Ignatius' opponents are not teaching true doctrine:

> But consider those who are of a different opinion with respect to the grace of Christ which has come unto us, how opposed they are to the will of God.
>
> They have no regard for love; no care for the widow, or the orphan, or the oppressed; or the bound, or the free; or the hungry, or the thirsty.[1]

Here, the touchstone is not just the doctrine of the incarnation, nor the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. These certainly are important for Ignatius, and my teachers did well in calling my attention to them. But now people all over the world are reading Ignatius anew. These new readers live in situations where issues of oppression, where the suffering of widows and of orphans, where hunger and thirst, are not just theories or stories, but everyday experiences. Suppose you lived in Guatemala, in a village where dozens of households are headed by women made widows by the wars of the eighties, would you not notice Ignatius' constant references to the connection between true faith and the care of widows and orphans?

Why did we not see this when I first studied Patristics? I would suggest that what Old Testament scholar Norman Gottwald says about his own field of research is also true of my own field, historical theology, as well as of theology in general:

[1]Ad Smyr. 6.2.

> Biblical scholars from the Renaissance to the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries were generally the intellectual adjuncts of monarchic, aristocratic, or clerical class interest. Increasingly in the nineteenth century, they became one functional group among many academicians and intellectuals who shared in the bourgeois revolutions against monarchic and aristocratic domination. A broadly bourgeois political and cultural perspective shaped their outlook, although the specifically democratic component was late in developing in Germany. By and large the position of biblical scholars, as a professional and intellectual elite, was oppositional both toward the declining monarchies and aristocracies and toward the rising underclasses of the industrial proletariat and, later, the peasantry. In contrast to the formerly dominant classes they were liberative and progressive, but toward the classes below them they were conservative and reactionary. An informed guess is that the greater proportion of biblical scholars was drawn from clerical or artisan circles, or from the families of government officials and bureaucrats, i.e., from groups shaped by a petty-bourgeois outlook.[2]

He then goes on to conclude that

> . . . the massive datum is that biblical scholars of the last two centuries have been firmly located in the middle class and have synthesized their scholarly humanistic ideals with bourgeois capitalism and, furthermore, have done so with surprisingly little sense of the inherent tensions and contradictions in such a synthesis…The narrowness has been a function of academic habit, general cultural pressure, and specific class location.[3]

What Gottwald says about biblical scholars is also true of historians, and certainly of historians of theology such as myself. Tomorrow I'll have more to say about my own intellectual and ecclesiastical formation. For the present, suffice it to say that I grew up believing that theology was essentially a matter of doctrines, which were then applied to living; but not vice versa. It is this vice versa that many Christians for whom suffering, poverty, and hunger are everyday experiences are now pointing out to us: It is not just a matter of employing doctrine to interpret

[2]Norman K. Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahwah: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), p. 10.
[3]Ibid., p. 11.

life; it is also a matter of employing life to interpret doctrine.

What I propose to do during our three days together is to explore with you how this may be true, helpful, and illuminating, as we look at three of the traditional themes of Christian theology. Today, I suggest we focus our attention on the doctrine of God, and more specifically, on the Trinity. Thursday, we shall be looking at the church—what we understand it to be, and how that relates to how we organize our church life, structure, and programs. Finally, on Friday, we will reevaluate the nature of Christian hope, and the long-worn phrase, "Pie in the sky, bye and bye."

Let us look first at the doctrine of God, and begin with a bit of history. There is no doubt that the first Christians' understanding of God was shaped primarily by the Hebrew Bible and the religion of Israel. Yet very soon these Christians went out into the pagan, Hellenistic world, and there they had to give account of their faith. It was not an easy task. To the Hellenistic intelligentsia, the stories of the Bible seemed to be a series of fables, far removed from the wisdom of their own sages, and often depicting God as a busybody intervening rather capriciously in peoples' lives. To the masses, the preaching of a single God, and one who could

not even be seen or represented like the gods of old, was sheer nonsense, and reeked of atheism.

Judaism had earlier faced similar difficulties. In the city of Alexandria, which was then the intellectual center of the Hellenistic world, Jews rubbed shoulders with pagan scholars and philosophers, and were often mocked for their conception of God and their dietary laws. In response to that situation, a number of Jewish scholars, notably Philo of Alexandria, had begun to produce an interpretation of Judaism that was more easily compatible with the dominant philosophy in the Hellenistic world, Platonism. This he had done by interpreting the Bible as a series of allegories about the same Supreme Being of whom the philosophers had spoken. Now Christians followed suit. The Hellenistic intelligentsia had no right to criticize them, for when Christians spoke of God they were actually referring to that Supreme Being of which the philosophers also spoke. God is the Being of Parmenides, the Supreme Idea of the Good of Plato, the Prime Unmoved Mover of Aristotle.

This had significant apologetic value, for it made it possible for Christians to claim what the

Hellenistic intelligentsia considered the best of its philosophical tradition. It also served to convince the masses that Christian faith was not sheer nonsense—that these Christians who many now considered atheists, because their God could not be seen, stood in the tradition of Socrates, who by then had become a folk hero, and who had also been accused of atheism.

But there are some problems—or at least some dangers—in apologetic theology. The first is that the apologetic bridge carries traffic in both directions. A bridge that was originally built in order to convince pagans that the Christian God made sense, soon served also to convince Christians that the best way to speak about God was as the pagan philosophers of old had done. To speak of God's "faithfulness," as Scripture did, was in reality a metaphor for God's immutability or changelessness, of which the philosophers spoke most eloquently. Hence the long list of divine attributes that many of us studied in our introductions to theology:

God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, immutable, impassible, etc.

The second problem with this apologetic bridge is that together with doctrines or views about God the bridge carries views about the ordering of society, about the values for which a society

ought to strive—in other words, that philosophical and theological doctrines have socioeconomic-political agendas, quite often hidden from those who hold such doctrines, but still quite real.

It is no coincidence that the same philosophers who were convinced that the greatest attribute of being, and therefore the essential mark of the Supreme Being, is changelessness also declared that philosophy is the occupation of the idle—that is, of those who do not have to work because others work for them. That Athenian society which we now hold up as a paragon of democracy was in reality a slave-holding society where most of the menial work was performed by slaves. Furthermore, shocking as this may sound to us today, to hire oneself out for work—what today we would call working by the hour or on salary, as most of us do—was considered a sort of partial slavery. While the slave's life was sold in its totality, the free laborer's life was sold piecemeal—by the hour, or by the day. Such people, no matter whether citizens or slaves, were “hoi polloi,” the many, the worthless, faceless masses. Above them were those who had time to think, to philosophize, to discuss in the Agora or the Stoa. Plato himself, whose philosophy so impacted Christian theology, not only considered himself part of this

intellectual elite standing above the masses, but even proposed a much better ordering of society—one in which the philosophers would rule, determining the lives, and even the mating, of soldiers and workers below them.

Is it surprising that philosophers working in such an environment, and representing such interests, people who had a vested interest in society remaining as it was, came to the conclusion that the highest attribute of the Supreme Being is changelessness?

Look then at the Hebrew Scriptures, the Bible of the early Christians. There too there is a Supreme Being—one whose nature is such as to take as a name, “I am who I am.” Yet this Supreme Being is not best described in terms of aloofness nor of impassibility, but of action and compassion: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” It is not necessary here to go into detail as to the date and purpose of composition of various books of the Hebrew Bible—a subject about which I must confess that my knowledge is deficient. It is clear, however, that a good part of these books were written, not to bolster the power of the powerful, but to limit and to criticize it.

This is certainly true of the prophets. But it is generally true of most of the canon. Even many of the sections dealing with the Davidic kingdom were written in order to hold other kings and rulers to standards they were prone to forget.

Is it then mere coincidence that these people who wrote about their experience of slavery in Egypt, of exile in Babylon, of invasions by foreign powers, and of oppression within their own society saw God, not as aloof and impassible, but as present, active, and compassionate?

The God of early Christianity, the God of the martyrs—even of martyrs such as Justin, who were profoundly influenced by Platonic philosophy—was an active God, a God who defended the oppressed, a God of people who were not very respectable within Hellenistic society. The respectable pagan philosopher Celsus, writing against Christians, depicted them as “workers in wool and leather, and fullers, and persons of the most uninstructed and rustic character ….” who claim that in order to seek true wisdom one is to go “to the women's apartments, or to the

leather shop, or to the fuller's shop."[4] And Christian philosopher Origen, in his extensive work *Against Celsus*, does not claim that this depiction of Christianity is false. He could not, for it was obvious that most Christians belonged to the lower echelons of society.

But then Christianity became respectable. This was a long process. Obviously, the goal of the apologists to whose work I have already referred was to make Christianity respectable. Origen himself, in refuting Celsus, was trying to show that Christianity agreed with the best of Hellenistic philosophy, and that its followers were not as uncouth as was generally thought. In this process, Emperor Constantine played an important role, for his tolerance and then support for Christianity marked a radical turn in imperial policy. But even Constantine himself was not all that respectable. Apparently his father had not married his mother, Helena, whose lowly occupation was that of a stabularia—a barmaid or, in the best of cases, an innkeeper.[5] He grew up as a hostage, and was educated in the court of Diocletian, another emperor of humble origin who had come up through the ranks, and therefore from the point of view of traditional Roman aristocracy he was an uncouth upstart, a powerful political and military leader, and a man to be feared and respected, but far removed from the refinement and social respectability of earlier

[4]Origen, Contra Celsum, 3.55. (ANF, 4:486).
[5]See Michael Grant, Constantine the Great: The Man and His Times (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), p. 16.

rulers such as Titus, Antonius Pious, or Marcus Aurelius. Although Constantine brought distinguished Christian teachers to his court, and Christians eventually began teaching in some of the most respected schools, it took over half a century for Christianity to become truly respectable among the social and intellectual elite. In Rome, the vast majority of the Senate and its aristocratic families remained staunch followers of the ancient religion. Constantine himself, even though eventually baptized as a Christian on his deathbed, retained the traditional imperial title of Pontifex Maximus—high priest of the traditional Roman gods. It was not until half a century later, in 375, that Emperor Gratian finally rejected that title as incompatible with his faith. Gratian himself tried to remove that altar to the goddess Victory from the Roman Senate-House, and faced enormous opposition from the old Roman aristocracy, which considered itself, not only the guardian of its ancient privileges, but also the guardian of culture and tradition. It was still sixteen years later that Emperor Theodosius finally established Christianity as the official religion of the Empire.[6] And even then, the ancient senatorial party supported the rebel Emperor Eugenius, who for some time threatened Theodosius' power in the West. Still later, when Rome fell to the Goths in 410, Augustine had to write his voluminous *City of God* in order to refute those who claimed that the fall of Rome was

[6]Cod, Theod. 16.10. 11-12.

the result of its having abandoned the ancient gods that had made her great.

In summary, it took a long time; but by the end of the fifth century a great shift had taken place. The religion that two centuries earlier had been considered uncouth, the faith of ignorant and superstitious people, had now become, not only the official religion of the Empire, but also the faith of all respectable folk within its borders. Meanwhile the ancient religions of Rome and the rest of the Hellenistic world, that conglomerate of beliefs that in ancient times had no name but "religion," or "the gods of our elders," now became known—as it is to this day—as "paganism."

That name itself is instructive. In ancient Latin, a *paganus*, a "pagan," was a rustic rural person, close to what today some call a "peasant." Nothing better illustrates the religious and social upheaval that had taken place than the fact that the religion of the ancient aristocracy, the religion for which the Roman Senate had stood against the upstart Christian emperors of the fourth century, was now called "paganism," the religion of rustic folk, a religion that subsisted only in remote rural places where civilization hardly reached.

Not only had the status of Christianity changed. So had the God of Christians. The active, liberating God that brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt, the God who suffered with the martyrs and sustained them in their suffering, had now become the Supreme Being of the philosophers, immutable, distant, sitting on a high throne much as the emperor's sat, to be worshiped in liturgies patterned after the practices and protocols of the imperial court, and to be approached through sainted intermediaries, much as the emperor had to be approached through his curia.

Thus, as I stated earlier, in the historical development of theology it is not only doctrine that shapes life, but also life that shapes theology. As life became more comfortable for Christians, and as Christianity became more respectable, so did the God of Christians become less troublesome; and as Christianity became the religion of the elites, so did the God of Christians become less subversive. Along these lines, one could suggest that part of what is happening today is that, within a worldwide Christian church where the powerful colonial and neocolonial powers are no longer the majority, new questions are being asked, and God and every other item of Christian theology are being reconceived in forms that appear new to the traditional

theology that developed in the colonial and neocolonial centers, but which in fact have many points of contact with the very early Christian experience, when, as Paul would say, “not many were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:26-28).

In passing, it may be worth considering the possibility that there may be a parallelism between the reaction of the ancient Roman elites to Christianity, and the reaction of much of today’s ecclesiastical and theological establishment to what is going on among the new masses of Christianity. For instance, to what degree is the Vatican’s opposition to some of the new Third World theologies an expression of the fear that such theologies will result in a church that the Vatican will no longer be able to control? And to what extent is our mainline refusal to acknowledge any validity to the many new expressions of Christianity in the Third World, or our refusal to listen to their theologians, a rearguard defense against a future we will no longer control? These are matters worth pondering.

With all this in mind, let us go back to the early development of Christian theology, and look at that specifically and uniquely Christian assertion about God, the doctrine of the Trinity. must confess that for a long time I had serious difficulties with the doctrine of the Trinity. The most I could do was to agree with one of my professors at Yale, who back in the late sixties said to me: “I really don't know what to make of the doctrine of the Trinity. But I respect the tradition and the teachings of the church enough so that I am not ready to dispense with it either.”

Historically, it has always been clear to me that the early church believed in God, that the early church also believed in Jesus as the Son of God, in whom the Eternal One is active and manifested for our salvation, and that the church believed in the Spirit, in whom God is present among us even when Jesus is no longer physically present. It was also clear that for a number of reasons early Christians insisted that these are not just three successive manifestations of God, as if God were Father in the Old Testament, Son in the Gospels, and now Spirit in the life of the church, but that in some sense God is, to use their vocabulary, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”—or, to use terms that also have ancient origin, and lack the gender-specific connotations

of the traditional formula, “Source, Word, and Holy Spirit.”

On this issue, I was not particularly helped by the attitude of most historians of Christian doctrine at the time of my first studies. In the mid-twentieth century, historical theology was still dominated by the liberal theology that had prevailed in the nineteenth century. In my own field of studies, our patron saint was Adolf von Harnack, a noted German scholar who had done much for the restoration of ancient texts, and whose detailed inquiry into the authorship and date of many of those texts made it possible for later generations to study the development of Christian thought in ways that had not been possible before him. Harnack was a typical nineteenth-century liberal who was convinced that theology and doctrinal development were nothing but a sign of the progressive Hellenization of the Christian faith, whose original tenets were, as Harnack put it in a series of lectures in 1900, simply three points:

> Firstly, the kingdom of God and its coming.
> Secondly, God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul.
> Thirdly, the higher righteousness and the commandment of love.[7]

From this perspective, it appeared that there was little of value in the development of Christian doctrine, and that all we had to do in an enlightened age such as ours was to go back behind all the obfuscation brought about by theology, and thus to rediscover the simple truths of the

[7]Adolf Harnack, What is Christianity? (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 51.

Gospel. The theologians who struggled and debated over issues such as the Trinity were simply wasting their time, and the results of their labors did not merit our attention. (Oddly enough, we were then encouraged to learn their language, to read their writings, to study their philosophical outlook, to do detailed exegesis of their work, as if what they had to say were in fact important. But that is just one more of the many non sequiturs of which the modern mind has been guilty.)

When it came to the doctrine of the Trinity, my teachers were inclined to dismiss most of it as the idle speculations of people who were infatuated with their philosophies and who apparently had nothing better to do. I still remember a lecture in which one of my professors, a very learned and saintly man who had devoted all his life to patristic studies, told us about the comment by Gregory of Nazianzus, in the fourth century, to the effect that one could not go to have one's shoes mended without getting into a discussion about the relationship between the Father and the Son. As our professor told the story, he smirked at what to him was the fanaticism of an age that could give such importance to the issues of the Trinity. And, as we heard him speak of it, we too chuckled knowingly, for we agreed that we were much too

enlightened to fall into such speculations.

Today I look at matters differently. Rather than marveling at an age so given to speculation that they could not see the futility and the insignificance of their debates, I marvel at my own age, so sure of itself that it never occurred to us to inquire what could have been so important in those trinitarian debates that they reached even into a cobbler's workshop. Much has been written about the discussions to which Gregory of Nazianzus refers, and in terms of abstract philosophical and historical inquiry, there is little new to be said. But the fact remains that as long as we do not understand why these issues engage people so deeply we shall be far from understanding the reasons why the Trinity was formulated as it was.

Leaping over the centuries, I find much help on this matter in a comment in the twentieth century by Roman Catholic Bishop Christopher Mwoleka, of Tanzania:

> I think we have problems understanding the Trinity because we approach the mystery from the wrong side. The intellectual side is not the best side to start with. We try to get hold of the wrong end of the stick, and it never works. The right approach to the Trinity is to imitate the Trinity… God does not reveal himself to us for the sake of speculation. He is not giving us a riddle to solve. He is offering us life. He is telling us: "This is what it means to live, now begin to live as I do." Why is the one and only reason why God revealed this mystery to us if it is not to stress that life is not life unless it is shared?[8]

[8]Quoted in Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, eds., Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), pp. 152-53

Mwoleka is not writing about the Trinity as a matter of speculation. When he wrote these words, the situation in Tanzania was such that thousands would face starvation unless people learned how to share. For him, the doctrine of the Trinity was important, not because it made intellectual sense or because it could be defended and clarified philosophically, but because it related directly to the pain and the situation of his people.

Taking then a cue from Bishop Mwoleka, I suggest we go back to the fourth century, to that time when Gregory of Nazianzus had to have his shoes fixed, and look again at the issues at stake. What was it that made people so passionate about what today seems to be a matter of idle speculation, a detail of doctrine, even an attempt to peer into the impenetrable mystery of God? What was it about the debate that engaged people in a cobbler's shop, much as today people sitting at a gas station might discuss the war in Iraq?

To put it very simply, what was being debated in the Arian controversy was the contrast between two radically different views of the Godhead, and more specifically, of God's

relationship with the world.

The Arian view was essentially a hierarchical view of the Godhead. God is the Supreme Being, the Ineffable One, the Prime Unmoved Mover, This immutable God cannot relate directly with the mutable world. Thus, between the true, high God and the world stands another, the Logos or Son of God. This other is lesser than the true God. This other is not eternal, for the eternal cannot relate with the temporal. The high God is so far removed from the Logos, that according to Arius:

> The Unbegun [the ineffable God] made the Son a beginning of things originated; and advanced Him as a Son to Himself by adoption. He [the Son] has nothing proper to God in proper subsistence. For He is not equal, no, nor one in essence with Him. Wise is God, for He is the teacher of all Wisdom. There is full proof that God is invisible to all beings; both to things which are through the Son, and to the Son He is invisible. . . . Foreign from the Son in essence is the Father, for He is without beginning.[9]

The opposing view, as stated in the Council of Nicea, saw God as directly involved in human life and human history. To make the Son or Logos an intermediate being between God and the world would mean that the One who was incarnate in Jesus was not true God, Alexander of Alexandria, in writing to his colleague Alexander of Thessalonica shortly after the beginning of the controversy, in order to explain why he cannot accept the teachings of Arius, declares quite

[9]Quoted by Athanasius, De syn. 2.15 (NPNF, 2nd series, 4:457)

starkly that “no distance exists between the Father and Son.”[10] And in its classical statement, the Council of Nicea declared that the Son of God, “God from God, light from light, true God from true God …for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.” That is the point that the Arians could not stand! A God, true God from true God, who can become truly human! A God who can become a carpenter! A God who can suffer the injustice and the shame of being crucified as a rabble rouser by the well-organized and respectable Roman Empire!

Put in a nutshell, the question then is, who is most capable of resembling and representing God? The Emperor in his well-guarded palace, within a fortified city, inaccessible to all but the most powerful, who then acts as his representatives? Or a humble Galilean carpenter? My liberal teachers, back in the 1950's, following the lead of Harnack, taught me that Nicea was “the apotheosis of Jesus.” In a way, that is true. But one could also argue that what was at stake, and what the defenders of Nicea stood for, was also in reality the much more scandalous “carpenterization” of God.

[10]Ep. ad Alex., 18. In William G. Rusch, ed., The Trinitarian Controversy (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), p. 36.

Common opinion has it that the doctrine of the Trinity was an imposition on the part of imperial power. And it is true that apparently it was Constantine who suggested that the term *homoousios* be included in the Creed of Nicea. What is often forgotten is that three years later Constantine was convinced that Nicea had been a mistake, that he ordered the restoration of Arius and his followers, and that he himself was finally baptized by one of the leaders of Arianism, Eusebius of Nicomedia. In fact, from that time on, and for several decades, most emperors opposed the Nicene faith and supported Arianism—although seldom in its most extreme form. Athanasius, the great defender of Nicea, was exiled so often that one could say that he commuted to exile. On the actions of the emperors favoring the Arians, he commented: "When did a judgment of the Church receive its validity from the Emperor?"[11] It was the respite of having a pagan emperor, Julian the Apostate, in 361 to 363, that finally gave the Nicene party the space to reorganize and left the Arians bereft of official support. And it was only after that, with Gratian and Theodosius, that the emperors finally embraced the theological stance of Nicea.

The doctrine of the Trinity, however, goes beyond the matter of how God relates to the world,

[11]Historia Arianorum, 52 (NPNF, 2nd Series, 4:289).

and also includes a certain view of the inner life of the Trinity. To express this very concisely, I would say that, just as what was at stake at Nicea was the "carpenterization" of God, so the most radical consequence of the doctrine of the Trinity is the "communitization" of God. God is One, but God is One in community. This is what Bishop Mwoleka meant by the words I have already quoted: the life of God as Trinity implies that "life is not life at all unless it is shared."

Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff has expressed this as follows:

> So to say that God is communion means that the three Eternal Ones, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are turned toward one another. Each divine Person goes out of self and surrenders to the other two, giving life, love, wisdom, goodness, and everything possessed. The Persons are distinct . . . not in order to be separated, but to come together and to be able to give themselves to one another.[12]

And, lest this might seem terribly far-fetched, it may help to remember that long before this time another Christian put it much more succinctly by declaring with apparent simplicity that "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8). We tend to think that this means that God's very nature is to love us. But to say that God is love implies much more. It implies that the very being of God is love, love of Godself—in traditional Trinitarian terms, love among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

For those of you who like big words, in classical theology this is expressed by the Greek term

[12]Leonardo Boff, Holy Trinity, Perfect Community (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), p. 3.

perichoresis or the Latin *circumincessio*—which may be roughly translated as a round-robin of interpenetration or interpermeation. What is meant by this is that in each of the three divine Persons the other two also dwell, in a mutual and sharing love—a matter to which we shall return tomorrow, as we seek new paradigms for understanding the nature of the church.

This is why I suggest that the doctrine of the Trinity is not only the "carpenterization" of God—the claim that God can dwell in the most humble of us—but also the "communitization" of God—the claim that God is One, but is One in community.

Significantly, the main defenders of Trinitarian doctrine against Arianism were also defenders of the life of the church in community—and in a community that was to be manifested in sharing of goods.

Athanasius, the great apostle of the Nicene faith, was probably himself a Copt—a member of the despised and dark-skinned population descended from the ancient Egyptians—, and for that reason, and his short stature, his more aristocratic opponents called him "the black dwarf."

From his writings we learn that, when the government gave a church previously belonging to the Nicenes to a group of Arians, they immediately expelled the widows and the poor who until then had been supported by the orthodox community. When the orthodox party, that had been expelled from the church, sought other venues for feeding the poor and the widows, the Arians accused them of sedition and brought them to trial. Athanasius comments that because of the Arians' attitude, "Persons were brought to trial for acts of kindness which they had performed; he who shewed mercy was accused, and he who had received a benefit was beaten; and they wished rather that a poor man should suffer hunger, than that he who was willing to shew mercy should give to him."[13]

The principle of community with its practical consequence, commonality, was stressed by all the great defenders of Nicene orthodoxy in the second half of the fourth century. Basil the Great declared that "all that is superfluous should be distributed among the needy."[14] And then he went on to say:

> Who is greedy? Is it not a person who is not content with having what is necessary? Who is a thief? Is it not one who takes what belongs to others? How, then are you not greedy, and are you not a thief, when you take for yourself what you received only as a

[13]Historia Arianorum, 61 (NPNF, 2nd Series, 4:292).
[14]Homilia in illud Lucam, Destruam, 1.

> steward? Why should we say that someone who takes the clothes off another is a thief, and someone who can clothe the naked and refuses to do so is not a thief? The bread you withhold belongs to the hungry. The extra cape in your chest belongs to the naked. The shoes that rot in your home belong to the barefoot.[15]

His brother Gregory of Nyssa told believers who practiced usury: "What I tell you first of all is to give, and then I call you to lend. Lending is another form of giving, but only when it is without usury or interest."[16]

And their friend Gregory of Nazianzus admits that he would rather not practice the love of others, but that since it is a commandment from the Lord, "I must not be rich while they go begging, nor enjoy good health without attempting to heal their wounds, nor have abundant food, good clothing and a roof under which I can rest, unless I offer them a piece of bread and give them, as I can, part of my clothing and shelter under my roof."

Let it be added in passing, that these three practiced what they preached. They belonged to relatively wealthy families in Cappadocia. But they gave away most of their riches and their lands in service to the poor. Basil founded an entire city where the poor could find sustenance,

[15]Ibid., 7.
[16]Oratio contra usurarios.

and which he called “the Kingdom.” Needless to say, this was seen as highly critical and subversive of the established order—by the rich, because it called them to levels of sharing for which they were not ready, and by the authorities, because it witnessed an order, a Kingdom, far more just than the Roman Empire.

At any rate, the point I am trying to make is the connection, or at least the basic congruence, between the view of the Trinity that these people believed and defended, and the social order that they proclaimed and sought to practice. For them, the Trinity is not just a doctrine to be affirmed, or the result of idle and overreaching speculation. For them the Trinity is an expression of what they conceive to be the ultimate nature of love, and the ultimate nature of oneness—the oneness, not of solitude, but of love.

It may be difficult for us to understand this. For us, being perfectly and absolutely “one” means aloneness. To us, this is logical; it is pure sense and reason. What we do not realize is that this understanding of perfect oneness is closely connected with our individualism, with the deeply ingrained notion that the more self-sufficient we are the better we are, with our ideal of the

self-made, independent person. It is closely connected with the foundational myth in our society, that success is in self-reliance, that true success consists in owing nothing to anyone.

But then think about all those millions of Christians to whom I referred at the beginning. Think of Bishop Mwoleka's diocese, where the only way people can survive is by sharing what little they have. Think of a family I met years ago in Bolivia. When their chickens laid a couple of extra eggs they took them to their neighbors, whose children were hungry. A few months earlier, when their cow went dry, those neighbors had brought them a bit of extra milk for their baby. And so I suggest, could it be that the God who has “hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and revealed them to infants” is now using these marginalized, oppressed, poor Christians to tell the rest of the church something we must all hear? Such people may not understand the intricacies of the doctrine of the Trinity. But they certainly understand what Mwoleka means when he says that “life is not life unless it is shared.” Or what Boff means when he says that “the divine unity is communitarian.” Or what John means when he says that “God is love.”

"Let anyone who has ears listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."