

Introduction

The Trinitarian Theological Story

“Trinitarian thinking has proved to be one of the best-kept secrets in theology during the last half of the twentieth century,” declared Ted Peters in 1993.¹ When viewed from our vantage point this side of the dawn of the new millennium, his statement appears to run exactly opposite to what is now the actual situation. Far from being a secret, the doctrine of the Trinity has become one of the most widely acknowledged Christian teachings, exploring the triunity of God has developed into one of the most popular theological pursuits, and trinitarian theology has emerged as one of the most widely touted theological labels, encompassing the efforts of thinkers representing nearly every ecclesiological tradition and theological persuasion. So great is the interest in trinitarian thought that a scant five years after Peters voiced his remark, David Cunningham opined wistfully that trinitarian theological studies had become so prevalent that “the phenomenon begins to look not so much like a renaissance as a bandwagon.” Cunningham then went so far as to assert, “Once threatened by its relative scarcity in modern theology, the doctrine of the Trinity now seems more likely to be obscured by an overabundance of theologians clustered around it.”²

Whenever the story of theology in the last hundred years is told, the rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity that sprouted and then came to full bloom during the eight decades following the First World War must be given center stage, and the rebirth of trinitarian theology must be presented as one of the most far-reaching theological developments of the century. With the passing of the twentieth century and the dawning of the new millennium quickly receding in our communal rearview mirror, we now stand at an opportune vantage point to narrate the

intriguing story of the renaissance of trinitarian theology that appears to be running its course.

The century had barely passed its mid-point when provisional sketches began finding their way into print. The most important of these studies was the mid-century report, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology*, penned by the Yale Divinity School professor Claude Welch. Convinced that theological developments from the publication of Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* to his own day had signaled "a renewed and growing interest in the trinitarian conception," Welch viewed 1952 as an appropriate occasion to review what had transpired. More specifically, he set himself to the task of bringing together "in a single focus the widely divergent lines of thought represented in the contemporary theological scene, ranging from complete indifference or outright opposition to the notion of the Trinity, to explicit efforts to restore this doctrine to the central place in the theological scheme."³

During the half century since the appearance of Welch's treatise the situation has changed dramatically. The theological hostility to the doctrine of the Trinity that he found so prevalent in 1952 has waned, even as the desire to give it its due, which was only in its nascent phase in Welch's day, has flourished. Moreover, the discussion of the place and character of trinitarian theology, which already in the patristic era was international or ecumenical in scope, has increasingly given due regard to the awareness that the church finds itself in a thoroughly pluralistic context.⁴ This realization has opened the door to a globalization of the discussion, as voices from Africa⁵ and Asia⁶ have joined with those from Europe and the Americas. These conversation partners have brought to the table ideas and models for understanding the divine triunity that draw from a communitarian focus that has largely disappeared from modern Western society but has remained a central dimension of cultures elsewhere in the world. Other scholars are pushing the "global" character of the discussion in a quite different direction. They

seek to bring overlooked figures from the past into the contemporary conversation, believing that, both when they soar and when they stumble, past theological proposals can contribute to the contemporary reconstruction of trinitarian thought, to paraphrase Amy Plantinga Pauw's conclusion regarding the potential contribution of Jonathan Edwards.⁷

The situation today differs from that of Welch's day in another manner as well. By the end of the twentieth century, the interest in proposing new ways of conceiving of the triunity of God, which was so much a part of the situation in 1952, had largely lost its momentum. With the coming of the new millennium, many theologians began turning away from the task of trinitarian doctrinal formulation. Believing with Robert Jenson that the doctrine of the Trinity "is not a separate puzzle to be solved but the framework within which all theology's puzzles are to be solved,"⁸ these thinkers launched into explorations as to how the insights of the renaissance of trinitarian thought might be applied to other theological topics and issues. For some, this has taken the form of drawing the implications of trinitarian theology into other foci of Christian doctrine, such as anthropology,⁹ ecclesiology¹⁰ and the doctrine of creation.¹¹ Others are attempting to push trinitarian thinking into the realm of church practice,¹² whether with the hope of finding a way of dealing with particular issues, as is evident in the recent discussions among evangelicals of the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for the role of women in the family and the church¹³ or with the intent of mining from the doctrine of the Trinity a crucial impulse for pastoral practice more generally.¹⁴

The task of sketching all the variegated dimensions of the resurgence in trinitarian thought surpasses what can be adequately accomplished within the confines of any single book. Therefore, what follows attempts a much more modest objective. My goal is to narrate the story of the renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity as it developed within the main trajectory of

Christian theology during the eighty years from the publication of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, which many observers (including Welch) credit with providing the initial impetus for this theological renaissance, to the appearance of T. F. Torrance's magnum opus, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, which might be considered to be the last comprehensive trinitarian theological offering of the century.

To accomplish this task, I focus on a short list of eleven theologians who in my estimation have proven to be the most significant contributors to the renewal of trinitarian thought. Although these eleven are by no means the only voices in the discussion, each of them has made a lasting contribution to the flow of the conversation; each has produced a significant milestone in the scholarly treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity that has affected the current climate of trinitarian thought. Taken together these theologians have set the tone for the contemporary understanding of doctrine of the Trinity as a whole. In short, the figures discussed in the following chapters have emerged as not only representatives of but also trend setters within the central current of trinitarian thinking in the twentieth century. Of course, a host of other thinkers have offered their own unique perspectives to the larger whole. Yet the other voices in the conversation generally find themselves repeatedly and routinely drawing from the work of one or several of the eleven theological trend setters, whose work is outlined in these pages.

The sketches of the thought of the theologians that comprise this study follow a similar, two-part pattern. Each section begins with a presentation of the theologian's trinitarian proposal. This, in turn, leads into a shorter summary of the critical response that the proposal evoked or the reception that it has enjoyed.

Although the book presents the work of eleven thinkers, it is not divided into eleven

chapters. Hence, in what follows, I do not simply recount the work of eleven independent thinkers. Rather, to facilitate the goal of telling the story of the rediscovery of trinitarian theology, the volume is ordered topically. The narrative unfolds in four major chapters, each of which delineates a central theme of the story by grouping together the leading theologians who both contributed to and comprise variations on that particular theme. Indeed, despite the complexity of trinitarian studies in the twentieth century and the circuitous route that the rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity has followed, the story of the trinitarian renaissance can be told by means of a surprisingly short list of central themes.

Rather than launching directly into the post-World War I narrative, however, I first sketch the background to the story by providing an initial chapter that seeks to put the twentieth century renaissance of trinitarian theology within the context of the larger story of which it is one installment. As the chapter title, “The Eclipse of Trinitarian Theology,” indicates, I present this previous history, especially in the West, as leading to an unceremonious loss of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity, before sketching the role of Friedrich Schleiermacher as a harbinger of the rebirth of trinitarian theology and then summarizing G. W. F. Hegel’s even more important context-determining contribution to the rediscovery of the doctrine that came to the fore in the twentieth century.

The main storyline begins in chapter 2 with the theme reflected in the chapter title: “Restoring the Trinitarian Center of Theology.” Here I survey the two great German Karls—Karl Barth and Karl Rahner—who more than any other thinkers both launched the renewal and set the parameters for the trinitarian theology that would arise in the twentieth century. Chapter 3, “The Trinity as the Fullness of (Divine) History,” highlights a second theme, one that was articulated above all by three thinkers—two Germans, Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, and one

American, Robert Jenson. These three explored the possibility that the divine self-disclosure and hence the identity of the triune God might be viewed as arising out of the interplay of the three trinitarian members within the flow of history, viewed as the story of God, rather than in the event of the divine self-disclosure in the word of God, as Barth and Rahner had proposed. The nascent social trinitarianism and relational ontology evident in the work of the “theologians of history” became more explicit in the explorations of three thinkers other significant thinkers, Leonardo Boff, John Zizioulas, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna. Exploration of this theme is the focus of chapter 4, “The Triumph of Relationality.” The story concludes by highlighting a final theme that became increasingly prevalent as the century drew to a close, namely, the renewed concern that the elevation of the three trinitarian persons and devising of an ontology of relationality not be allowed to overshadow the importance of the acknowledgment that God is eternally triune apart from the interplay of the three persons in history. To this end, I delineate under the title “The Return of the Immanent Trinity” the contributions of three thinkers who to varying degrees upheld the integrity of the eternal God who remains triune even apart from the ebb and flow of salvation history: Elizabeth Johnson, Hans Urs von Balthazar, and Thomas F. Torrance.

In his masterful treatment of the development of trinitarian theology in Christian history, published at the three-quarter mark of the twentieth century, Edmund Fortman concluded, “The doctrine of the Triune God has had an amazing history.”¹⁵ Our perspective as those who stand on this side of the dawning of the new millennium allows us to see that at no period in the history of Christian theology has the story been more amazing than during the twentieth century. Indeed, the eight decades from Barth’s first book to Torrance’s magnum opus witnessed a truly remarkable, monumental and far-reaching development—the rediscovery of the triune God.

¹ Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in the Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 7.

² David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 19.

³ Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), viii–ix.

⁴ See, for example, several of the essays in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁵ See, for example, A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1994).

⁶ Examples include Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Nozomu Miyahira, *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God: A Japanese Perspective on the Trinity* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2000).

⁷ Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 192.

⁸ Robert W. Jenson, "Karl Barth," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 31.

⁹ See, for example, my own work on the topic of the *imago dei*. Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

¹⁰ An important example is Miroslav Volf **Error! Main Document Only.**, *After Our Likeness: the Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹¹ For a helpful example, see Samuel M. Powell, *Participating in God: Creation and Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

¹² For one of the most creative offerings, see Cunningham, *These Three Are One*.

¹³ An example is Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002).

¹⁴ See, for example, Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

¹⁵ Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), xv.