

What Is the Difference Between the Ontological Trinity and the Economic Trinity?

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Karl Rahner has declared that Christians in their practical lives are “almost mere monotheists”; proposing we should be able to admit that if the doctrine of the Trinity were proved false, the majority of religious literature could “well remained virtually unchanged.”¹ To some extent the difficulty experienced by everyday Christian in expressing the concept of the Trinity is supportive of Rahner’s hypothesis. While the triune God is evident throughout Scripture, the word “Trinity” is found nowhere in Scripture; nor is the exact premise systematically presented and or defended. Struggling with this, Christians seek the assistance of theologians who respond with the theological constructs of the “economic Trinity” and the “ontological Trinity.” Without intention, their “help” often further confuses the issue, potentially introducing the misleading notion of two Trinities. To quell this matter, theologians must distinguish what these terms mean and then address the implications of these terms on our understanding of the Trinity.

The economic Trinity refers to the biblical testimony of God’s participation with his creation, or the “economy of salvation” as Father, Son, and Spirit.² This understanding is taken from Tertullian’s distinction between the divine *substantia* (which is one) and divine *oikonomia* (multiple administrations, dispensations or activities) of the

¹ Rahner, Karl, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 10-11.

² Ben Leslie, "Does God have a Life?: Barth and Lacugna on the Immanent Trinity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 378.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³ The Greek word *oikonomia*, meaning management of the household, or economy, is used here in the sense of God's active involvement in the world, particularly the doings of salvation. This activity of the triune God within the history of salvation provides practical definition or understanding of the persons of the Trinity.

The economic Trinity infers the threefold self-manifestation of God as creator Father, redeemer Son, and sustainer Holy Spirit, relative to man.⁴ Karl Barth follows this functional line, replacing "economic Trinity," with his preferred nomenclature "modes of God's being." Barth understands these "modes of God's being" (creator, reconciler, or redeemer) as occurring within the context of God's revelation.⁵ Jürgen Moltmann concurs with the revelatory quality of the economic Trinity by stating it is also called the "revelatory Trinity"; the triune God is revealed through his dispensation of salvation.⁶ The economic Trinity is grounded in our experience of God's revelatory triune actions on behalf of our salvation. The economic Trinity, based on God's activities in relation to our experiences, is more easily understood.

More difficult for the typical Christian to understand is the the ontological Trinity, which by definition excludes our experience. The ontological Trinity, also known as the essential or immanent Trinity, refers to the three-in-one nature of God in eternity without

³ Claude Welch, *In This Name; The Doctrine of The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 293.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Leslie, "Does God have a Life?", 378.

⁶ Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: the Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 151.

reference to creation.⁷ During this time before creation, God is God in himself,⁸ essential in being, without definition provided by creation. Again using his own terminology, Barth discusses this pre-creation ontological understanding of God as “God antecedently in himself.” Barth understands the immanent Trinity as antecedent to God’s revelation as Father, Son, and Spirit.⁹ Ontological discussion of God “being” before creation is not to say he was “by himself,” or as we would put it “alone.”

Colin E. Gunton captures this manifold nature of the ontological Trinity, describing God as a “being-in-relation” before creation took place. Already in relationship, Gunton states there was no need for God to create what is other than himself.¹⁰ Moltmann echoes, it is difficult to imagine an immanent Trinity in which God is by himself without love, and not in relationship.¹¹ Joining in, Rahner affirms that any understanding of the immanent Trinity should not start from a false assumption of a “lifeless self-identity,” but one in which God is in relationship.¹² The ontological Trinity is the triune God before creation, essential in being, already in relationship as three and one.

By definition, the ontological Trinity (in existence) precedes the economic Trinity. Barth encapsulated this proposing the actuality of the “revealed Trinity” is only

⁷ Leslie, "Does God have a Life?", 378.

⁸ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 151.

⁹ Leslie, "Does God have a Life?", 378.

¹⁰ Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 142.

¹¹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 151.

¹² Rahner, *The Trinity*, 103.

possible because of the ontological Trinity having already existed in God's eternity.¹³ While this understanding is philosophically pure, in experience we gain our information about the ontological Trinity through the economic Trinity.¹⁴ Moltmann pronounces that knowledge of the economic Trinity (specifically the experience of salvation) must precede knowledge of the immanent Trinity.¹⁵ The Cross being seminal to his theology, Moltmann further concludes that the economic Trinity not only reveals the ontological Trinity but also has a "retroactive effect" on it. The relationship of the triune God to himself and creation should not be seen as "one-way." In fact, Moltmann asserts a "mutual relationship" between God and his creation; although he is careful to state the mutuality does not equate God's relationship to the world with his relationship to himself.¹⁶ Paul Molnar seems to also see a transactional element between the ontological and economic trinity. Molnar understands, "the immanent Trinity is a description of who God is who meets us in and through our experiences and not simply a description of salvation history or of our experiences of faith and hope."¹⁷

Accepting the economic Trinity as based in our human experience, and preceding understanding of the ontological Trinity, debate has ensued as to whether there should be a distinction between the two, and some have proposed abandoning the ontological

¹³ Leslie, "Does God have a Life?", 380.

¹⁴ Paul D. Molnar, "The Trinity and the Freedom of God," *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 8, (2003): 60.

¹⁵ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 152-153.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 159-161. This mutual relationship is best exemplified when Moltmann says, "On the cross God creates salvation outwardly for his whole creation and at the same time suffers this disaster of the whole world inwardly in himself." *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁷ Molnar, "The Trinity and the Freedom of God", 66.

Trinity entirely. Catherine Mowry LaCunga, focusing on the practical relevancy of the Trinity to Christian living, reflects that we cannot truly speak meaningfully of God's interior state. She proposes revitalizing trinitarian doctrine under a wholly economic model, essentially collapsing the ontological into the economic.¹⁸ This reconstruction parallels Rahner's self proclaimed axiomatic statement "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."¹⁹ Others argue that distinction between the economic and ontological Trinity is vital. Molnar believes an accurate understanding of the triune God occurs when we think from "a center in God rather than from a center and ourselves."²⁰ Operating from the center of human experience has the consequences of the limitations of that experience being imposed on God. This results in God's triunity being shaped by what we naturally know about God, ultimately compromising both divine and human freedom in the process.²¹ Moltmann agrees that a distinction between the immanent trinity and the economic trinity "secures God's liberty and his grace."²² While he advocates this distinction, Moltmann declares this cannot mean there are two Trinities, the same triune God as he is in his saving revelation is the same as he is in himself.²³

¹⁸ Leslie, "Does God have a Life?", 386-387.

¹⁹ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 22. Rahner supports this notion by stating "the Logos with God and Logos with us, immanent and the economic Logos are strictly the same." Ibid., 33

²⁰ Molnar, "The Trinity and the Freedom of God", 61.

²¹ Ibid., 64-65

²² Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 151.

²³ Ibid.

Trinitarian faith is ontologically Christian faith. One cannot “be” a Christian and not be trinitarian; it is an essential and determining dogma. Nonetheless many Christians, assert belief in the triune God devoid of trinitarian understanding.²⁴ The theological models of the ontological and economic Trinity are fundamental to true understanding of the Trinity beyond personal experience. Yet as Moltmann has said, “The ideas and concepts with which we know God and conceive him for ourselves all derive from this impaired life of ours.”²⁵ In spite of our mortal efforts to describe, define, and clarify the Trinity, the triune God remains and shall always remain a mystery. A mystery which must inevitably be accepted by faith.

²⁴ I confess this position prior to the in-depth study of this current course.

²⁵ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 161-162.

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