

The Triune God in South African Systematic Theology Since 1976

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1. Brief motivation: Focus on God-symbol

The dialectic between *relevance and identity* has been a methodological key in my theology since I worked on a doctoral thesis in the mid-eighties. Originally I thought about resurrection and liberation, and gradually I expanded this to a focus on Trinitarian theology within the (post) apartheid condition, and wrote, merely for myself, a programmatic essay in 2004 on this. My intuition has always been that I should take apartheid seriously, not merely as a social ethical question, but also as an epistemic *topos*. At the same time, the question about God has intrigued me from early on, realising that the identity of faith and theology stands and falls here. The so-called ‘return of God in contemporary theology’ (Tracy 1994) and the emergence of the Trinitarian Renaissance naturally appealed to me, and I situated my own thinking and research along these parameters. The recognition of ‘something’,¹ whether we name it God, or the divine, or the Sacred, or the Ultimate, or the Transcendent, remains of absolute importance. That symbol is a final orientation to make sense of reality, and by saying this I do not deny others their right to advance a radical immanent understanding of life. For the Christian faith, the Trinitarian symbol is the central reference, and from this Mystery, we should construct the cognitive content of the faith and its relevance to society at large. *How* that confession has academically and socially functioned in South African Systematic Theology is my interest in this submission.

2. The previous generation of systematic theologians

Unfortunately, nobody has undertaken a full and detailed history of Systematic Theology in South Africa.² Such a task would not only be helpful but would at the same time be most daunting to complete. It would require a focus on theologians, institutions, societies, journals and

1 See for a discussion of the apt Dutch term ‘*ietsisme*’ – Sarot (2014).

2 See Strauss (1995) for research with a limited focus.

post-graduate research, but also interpretative categories, in order to understand the various operating paradigms. One insight will undeniably transpire: the dominance of the Reformed tradition, which could be easily explained historically. Major systematic theologians, obviously with a few exceptions, were largely from this tradition. My own narrative will mostly follow this path, although I am aware of remarkable systematic theologians from other traditions.

The seventies and eighties in South Africa were, in terms of Systematic Theology, dominated by figures such as J.A. Heyns, W.D. Jonker, A. König and J.J.F. Durand. It was in a sense the exciting heyday of this discipline and the era of the influence of textbooks. To find in Afrikaans for the first-time work of high quality, with an ambitious and totalising scope, was quite an experience. The series *Wegwysers in die Dogmatiek* was introduced by Durand with his work on God – *Die lewende God* (1976). Two years later Heyns published a full and comprehensive dogmatics, *Dogmatiek* (1976), which became an immensely influential reference book for ministers. König started a series of monographs on God, eschatology and Christology, the doctrine of creation and eventually the anthropology, which was introduced by his *Hier is ek!* (1975).

In this purview, one cannot describe the position of specifically Heyns, Durand and König, who wrote explicitly on God. But a number of perspectives can be raised. These theologians all worked in a typical Western tradition, deeply influenced by Dutch theology and, to some minor extent, German theology. They would all have considered themselves as Trinitarian theologians. Retrospectively, a number of commonalities can be identified: first, the critical shift advocated by Barth, whose work preceded all their publications, that the Trinity should be the *fundamental optic* for theology, has not been internalised by them. Second, very little, if any trace at all, of *social Trinitarianism*, is present in their work. Third, there is no openness to the reality of *Africa* and its conception of the divine. Finally, their positions on apartheid, which differed, were not informed fundamentally by their Trinitarian faith, but by other considerations and other forms of theological rhetoric. Dogmatics remains in their work, of which the academic quality should in no way be questioned, sanitised from the travails of history and its conflicts.

3. Excuse: The Trinitarian Renaissance

It may be interesting to correlate the South African work with the international Trinitarian Renaissance. The works by Barth, his *Church Dogmatics* Volume I/1 (original 1936) and by Rahner, his essay in *Mysterium Salutis* Volume 2 (original 1967), are widely considered the

impetus for the new twentieth-century interest. The actual narrative may go much further back, even two centuries, and especially to Hegel (see Sanders 2012:22–24).³ Barth established an intimate relationship between revelation as his point of departure and the Trinity, and by placing a discussion of this doctrine right at the beginning of dogmatics he cemented it as the determining hermeneutical optic for all the subsequent discussion. The foundation was laid for a consistent Trinitarian vision of the Christian faith.⁴ Rahner called attention to the dismal position of the Trinity in actual church life and formulated what has become known as the Rahner rule: ‘The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity, and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity’ (Rahner 1997:22). The far-reaching ontological and epistemological implications of this affirmation are still being explored by scholars. It does not seem that these early developments have decisively influenced the previous generation of South African systematicians.

The Trinitarian Renaissance and its emphases have been well described and only a few features can be highlighted. Central in this shift is obviously a new enthusiasm and appreciation of the doctrine. More substantial are the prominence of the immanent/economic distinction and its significance, the turn to *relationality* to identify the nature of God, and the insistence on the ‘practical implications’ of the doctrine (see Kärkkäinen 2009 and Schwöbel 2014 for excellent overviews). A book like *The Oxford handbook to the Trinity* (Emery & Levering 2011b) conveys an impression of how comprehensive and far-reaching the recovery actually has been. Seminal early works were published by Boff (1988), Jenson (1982), Jüngel (1976), LaCugna (1991) and Moltmann (1981),⁵ to mention only a few. The turn to the Trinity obviously generated much controversy.⁶ Ways clearly part on interpretations of patristic theologians such as the Cappadocians and Augustine on the notion of a ‘social Trinity’, on reinterpretations of

3 Sanders (2012:23) in an interesting treatment of the history of the Trinity emphasises that a rather ‘Romantic doctrine of the Trinity ... made its way into the modern age’. Reinterpretation took place in light of central Romantic ideas: world history, human experience and the retrieval of the past. He correlates motifs and concerns of Trinitarian scholars such as Moltmann, Pannenberg, LaCugna and Johnson with these ideas.

4 See Habets & Tolliday (2011) for a detailed discussion of various aspects of Barth’s Trinitarian views.

5 Dates of translations.

6 For only one example, see the work of the vocal critic Stephen Holmes (2012). His basic thesis is summarised in the following words (:2) – ‘I see the twentieth century renewal of Trinitarian theology as depending in large part on concepts and ideas that cannot be found in patristic, mediaeval, or Reformation accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity.’

divine attributes such as immutability and simplicity, and on the precise function of the doctrine. It seems that the next generation had to engage with these reflections.

4. Present generation of systematic theologians

The well-known textbook *Doing Theology in context* (De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1994) was not only published in a symbolically significant year but also inaugurated a new era. The chapter on the Trinity by Catholic scholar Brian Gaybba is a significant contribution. It was well informed by the work of scholars such as Boff, Gunton, LaCugna, Moltmann and Rahner, and also signals the potential impact on society. Gaybba claims that ‘the doctrine of the Trinity has an undeniable advantage as a theological basis for reflecting on social structures’ (Gaybba 1994:86). The value of the Trinity as ‘socio-political model’ is to be found in ‘total sharing’ among people; he also emphasises that the Trinity should be allowed ‘to cast sufficient critical light on nationalism’ (Gaybba 1994:86, 87). Unfortunately, this excellent article was not followed up with further work on the Trinity.

John de Gruchy, who straddles in a sense both the previous and the present era and who continues with outstanding work even after his retirement, is an interesting case. His extensive oeuvre does not evidence that he is a Trinitarian thinker; this can be clearly seen in his own evaluation of this more recent work on God as the ultimate mystery (De Gruchy 2014:157–166). In his work *Christianity and democracy*, he has a subsection on ‘the Triune God and human sociality’ in which he refers to the doctrine to explain the significance of the *imago Dei* for human relationality (De Gruchy 1995:238–243).

A bibliographical overview of publications by the contemporary South African systematic theologians on Trinitarian theology conveys an impression that they have clearly taken note of the ‘turn to the Trinity’ in twentieth-century theology. There is definitely a much greater awareness of the decisive importance of the Trinity for doing theology and there are indications of an exploration of Trinitarian resources for distinct research interests.

Dirkie Smit, in an overview of the present developments in Systematic Theology, identifies the Trinitarian Renaissance as the first of such new interests. He views this as the self-critical reflection by the Christian community on his own conviction (Smit 2013:387f). In another contribution, he investigates specifically what a Reformed understanding of the Trinity may entail (Smit 2009). He emphasises that all Reformed theologians consider the Trinity as central to their work. One cannot,

however, escape the impression that there is a certain hesitation in his work towards the immanent Trinity and to the practical value, that is, sociopolitical, of the doctrine (see Smit 2009:65, 72, 75). The emphasis is more on the action of God (Smit 2009:66). This discussion by Smit gives a good understanding of why the Trinitarian symbol has played such a small role in political life. If the emphasis is predominantly on the agency of God, other potential discursive employments, for example, mimetic and heuristic ones, are eclipsed. Nico Koopman's interest in the Triune God comes from his work on public theology and he proposes 'a Trinitarian approach' (Koopman 2007). The typical stress, identified by Smit, is clearly seen in his proposal: Koopman is interested in the work of God and he utilises the planetary theology of McFague to develop this so-called 'Trinitarian approach', which is basically a compilation of multiple ideas associated with each divine person. As long as a theology does not fully account for *what doing Trinitarian theology entails*, it will come across as rather incoherent, as can be seen in this work. The very implications of God's identity as Triune do not crystallise in Koopman's work.

Some of the most informed and creative work is found in a number of articles by Robert Vosloo. What makes his work particularly important is the hermeneutical exploration of the Trinitarian doctrine with categories found in post-modern thought, for example 'gift' and 'hospitality'. With Trinitarian resources, he interprets human personhood, Christian moral life, and otherness and hospitality (Vosloo 1999, 2002, 2004b). Vosloo is aware of the dangers of an uncritical analogical movement from the Trinity to human life but still believes that 'Trinitarian theology will continue to play an important role to free our imagination' (Vosloo 2004b:89).

David T. Williams (2003) wrote arguably the most comprehensive work on the practical implications of Trinitarian theology – *The 'two hands of God': Imaging the Trinity*. The basic assumption is that '[t]he church should then act in a Trinitarian way in the world, reflecting the nature of God in the way it acts' (Williams 2003:14). He employs the notion of 'imitating the Trinity' without reservation (see Williams 2003:22ff), and discusses then in successive chapters mission, harmony between people, marriage, the socio-economic order, poverty, the population crisis, environmentalism and worship. There is, sadly, no evidence of recognition of his work by other systematic theologians. One may question whether the work does not suffer from 'over-reach' and whether it does not precisely exemplify the projections of social Trinitarianism which makes it so suspect to its many critics. For example, Williams wants to justify exclusive heterosexuality with an appeal to the Trinity (Williams 2003:72ff). Analogical thinking should be approached with nuance and not in the way he does. The contribution by E. Conradie (2013) about an

adequate Trinitarian theology is crucial. His focus is on ecology, and he places this in the complex frame of the relationship between creation and salvation. This line of thinking deserves further exploration.

It should also be noted that a number of doctoral theses have been written on the Trinity as an expression of the new interest. Hadebe (2013) explored the Trinitarian confession for gender challenges in the context of HIV and Aids; Kombo (2000) worked on African Trinitarian theology; Kritzinger (2004) on Walter Kasper; Leene (2013) on the Trinity and gender relations; Van Wyk (2013) on a Trinitarian ecclesiology; and Verhoef (2008) on Robert Jenson.⁷

When one compares the two eras – before and after 1994 – and their employment of Trinitarian resources, there are obviously common emphases, but there are also some distinct shifts to be identified. There is undeniably greater interest in and enthusiasm for Trinitarian reflection. One encounters a greater variety of themes, problems addressed, and theologians engaged. In an interesting article, Van den Brink and Van Erp (2009) investigated the question whether the new interest in the Triune God has affected Dutch theology and came to fairly negative conclusions about the embrace and integration of this development. My impression, in terms of South African Systematic Theology, is fairly much the same. Some affirming nods to the Trinitarian Renaissance in one or two articles do not amount to an in-depth constructive engagement with the confession and its implications for understanding the Christian vision and for social life. Three weaknesses characterise South African Systematic Theology: a neglect of Patristic theology, an occupation with narrow research foci, and a failure to construct comprehensive material ‘dogmatics’ like the older scholars, and a hesitance to think consistently from the perspective of the central God-symbol. When saying these, one should immediately acknowledge excellent work being done on ecology, the faith–science dialogue, and public theology. Behind the three weaknesses could be historical or theological, but also social, reasons. What is clearly needed is greater acquaintance and engagement with the Patristic theology, new interest to articulate comprehensive and material constructions of the Christian vision, and a deep intuition of the decisive and critical centrality of the God question. This should be coupled with an acute sense of belonging, of social location and that theology happens in this dialectic between identity and relevance.

7 A number of singular reflections, although not part of sustained attention but of excellent quality, should be mentioned. See for example Loubser (2003) and Theron (2008).

5. Excuse: An example of new Systematic Theology

At this point in the argument, it may be fruitful to glance briefly at the international scene and note the vitality of Systematic Theology and the reconstructive projects underway.⁸ It is worth mentioning the ambitious work by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. This Finnish scholar, from Pentecostal orientation, is writing a five-volume work which he calls *A constructive Christian theology for the pluralistic world* (see Kärkkäinen 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016). His point of departure is a radically changed world, and he explicitly calls for a theology which is *coherent, inclusive, dialogical and hospitable* (Kärkkäinen 2013:1–33). What is impressive in his reconstructive work is the attention to Biblical theology, Trinitarian theology, a conversation with global Christianity, faith/science dialogue, voices of the marginalised ‘other’, and world religions in the articulation of the material Christian vision. Obviously, one could raise critical questions and cannot copy this for the South African context, but the approach here warrants careful attention.

6. Future of the Triune God in South African Systematic Theology

The future will arguably always surprise us, as the movement of the Triune God can never be domesticated in our extrapolations from our existing knowledge. But if one is audacious enough to intimate an agenda, it may include the following *six whispers*:

The great theological advances of the twentieth century – the new interest in the Trinity and the explicit turn to contextuality – should be nurtured and brought into close mutual interaction. The challenge may be to map a full Trinitarian theology for (post)apartheid South Africa. This will require a retrieval of the paramount importance of the *God-symbol* to orientate life, and a deep commitment to a sense of place. Within this dialectic, Systematic Theology could navigate its future direction.

There is much hype about *interdisciplinarity*, but little is really accomplished about material Systematic Theology. Responsible speaking about God requires scholarly insights of Biblical studies, of historical theology, of philosophy of religion, of spirituality, but also of cultural theory. The task of an interdisciplinary approach to the God-question has not been addressed.

Such an interdisciplinary approach should be enriched by employing intentionally a variety of interpretative frameworks, for example, alterity,

8 New multi-volume projects are being developed by, for example, S. Coakley, G. Ward, and K. Sonderegger.

faith/science dialogue, faith/art dialogue, global voices (especially from the South), and world religions. At the moment, most of these theologies function in a compartmentalised manner without much integration and coherence. Each interpretative framework elicits some vision on the divine mystery. The voices and the instruments should be conducted into a symphony.

What the referent to the linguistic construct 'Triune God' entails can never be exhausted and domesticated. The mystery of the Ultimate should deepen, but at the same time, the human naming of the identity of this Reality should continue. Apophatic theology and kataphatic theology cannot do without the other. The imaginative and Trinitarian rethinking of the *divine perfections for our place* is a particular outstanding task. What attributes do we select for this context, and how do we interpret them in a Trinitarian way? This is a theological, but also an ethical and political responsibility.

Many attempts at studying Trinitarian theology can be found, but little account is given as to *how* this should be done. How does the God-referent function discursively and rhetorically? Most of the time, the approach is to elaborate on the multiple manifestations of divine action, sometimes modelling is used. Much more is at stake. God can be understood in terms of *agency*, but the resistance to *mimesis* in unfounded and should be properly described. But God also could function *heuristically*. How these three interact should be carefully distinguished and described to advance *theo-thinking*. 'God' is for many a form of inhibiting reality. The very *categories of God association* should be redefined. 'God' is the fecund source of novel, imaginative, and creative thinking. The glory of the Triune God is the source of the beauty of theology.